Tour Code
ES3

ADVENTURESABROAD

SPAIN: NORTH & SOUTH

'World Heritage Mosaic'

18 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Santiago de Compostela

Welcome to Spain. We arrive in Santiago de Compostela, a city built of golden granite and protected as a national monument in its entirety.

Arcades shade its flagstone streets, and the old town is at its best on foot. Pilgrims have ended their long walks in the square before the cathedral for over a thousand years, and tomorrow we join them there.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Santiago de Compostela: City Tour

Santiago has drawn pilgrims for over a thousand years, and we begin where their walk ends, in Obradoiro Square, named for the stonemasons' workshops that built the cathedral. The Archbishop's residence preserves 12th-century chambers, the neoclassical Town Hall (formerly Raxoy Palace) faces the cathedral, and San Jeronimo College, a 17th-century building, is entered through a Romanesque portal from an earlier site.

Statues of St James throughout the cathedral show him as a pilgrim, with staff, broad-brimmed hat and scallop shell, symbols recognized across Christian Europe. We tour the Cathedral Museum and Cloister, where sacred art unfolds over the centuries, then stop at the Platerias Gate, the cathedral's only surviving Romanesque facade, whose sculptures narrate biblical stories in stone.

The highlight is a guided walk across the cathedral roofs. We enter through Gelmirez Palace beside the cathedral, climb past the gallery above the Gloria doorway and step out onto the rooftops. From there the historic centre spreads below us, and the care that went into planning the city becomes easy to see.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Santiago de Compostela - Leon

We travel by road to Leon, where Roman foundations support Gothic magnificence. The city began as a Roman military camp and became the capital of a medieval Christian kingdom, and we start at San Isidoro Collegiate Church, a Romanesque masterpiece and the final resting place of 23 kings and queens.

The 13th-century cathedral is Gothic in the French manner, its walls opened to more than 100 stained-glass panels that fill the interior with jewel-toned light.

Walking on through the old quarter, we pass stretches of medieval wall and remnants of the original Roman fortifications, then reach Casa de Botines, a neo-Gothic building by Antoni Gaudi that shows his imagination at work beyond Barcelona. Leon's place on the pilgrim routes to Santiago brought the prosperity behind these monuments.

Overnight in Leon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Leon - Cave of Altamira - Bilbao

We leave Leon and drive north to Altamira, where painters were at work well over 14,000 years ago. Discovered in the 1870s, the cave's nearly perfect paintings of wild animals and human handprints stand among the finest Paleolithic art known, made when ice still covered much of Europe.

The original cave is closed to preserve the paintings, so we visit the museum and its precise replica. Up close, the bison, horses and boar show how the artists used natural pigments and the cave's own contours to give their animals volume.

Continuing into Basque country, we reach Bilbao, tucked among the green coastal mountains of Euskadi. Locals call it Bilbo in Basque and affectionately botxo, the hole, for the valleys that shelter it. Fishing hamlets huddled here for protection from Norman raiders and Atlantic pirates, and the industrial port that grew from them has reinvented itself as a cultural destination without losing its fierce Basque independence.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bilbao: The Guggenheim

Medieval Bilbao opens the morning, its cobbled Old Town streets and intimate squares tracing the city's path from fishing village to industrial powerhouse to cultural destination.

Then comes the Guggenheim. Frank Gehry's titanium-clad museum covers 31,329 sq m/349,000 sq ft, and its curves and angles shift with every viewpoint, so the building reads as sculpture before we step inside. Its atrium rises 50 m/165 ft, and the galleries hold 20th-century American and European art by artists such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Picasso, Pollock and Serra, in rotating exhibitions.

The museum gave its name to the Bilbao Effect, the idea that a single building can revive a city's economy and civic pride.

The afternoon is ours to shape. We can stay on at the Guggenheim, visit the Basque Museum or the Fine Arts Museum, take a guided boat tour along the Nervion estuary to see the city's industrial heritage, or join the bus excursion to San Sebastian, about 1 hr 20 min each way. Our Tour Leader helps us plan.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Bilbao - Fly to Barcelona: City Tour

We fly from Bilbao to Barcelona and meet our local guide for a panoramic introduction to the city, where Catalan culture and architectural invention meet. We pass Plaza Espana, ringed by grand buildings and fountains, and the 1992 Olympic sites, a moment when Barcelona showed itself to the world and set off the renewal still under way.

From the Montjuic viewpoint the skyline, the Mediterranean and Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, rising like a stone forest above the city grid, lie spread out before us. We continue along Gran Via, one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, lined with shops, restaurants and historic buildings.

The tour ends at Park Guell, Gaudi's UNESCO World Heritage site, where mosaic pathways, undulating benches and the famous ceramic lizard turn public space into something between garden and fantasy. It is a first look at a city where medieval foundations carry modernist invention.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Barcelona: City Tour

We begin in the Barrio Gotico, where Roman foundations carry one of Europe's best-preserved medieval quarters. Narrow, winding streets lead to Barcelona Cathedral and the Royal Palace, and the weathered stone and shadowed alleys keep the Middle Ages close.

We then transfer to the Sagrada Familia, Gaudi's masterpiece and Barcelona's best-known landmark, for a guided tour. Its spires twist upward like living growth, and stained glass casts rainbow patterns across forest-like columns inspired by the geometry of nature. Begun in 1882, the basilica is still being completed by contemporary craftspeople committed to Gaudi's vision.

The afternoon is free. You might choose to visit the Museu Picasso, with the formative works of Spain's most celebrated modern artist, the National Art Museum of Catalonia for Catalan art from medieval to contemporary, the Joan Miro Foundation or Parc de la Ciutadella, or simply stroll La Rambla with its shops, cafes and street performers.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Barcelona: Montserrat & Leisure Time

Montserrat rises from Catalonia's horizon, its jagged silhouette explaining the name, "serrated mountain". Pilgrims have climbed among its stairs, caves, chapels and hermitages for over a thousand years. We drive through Montserrat Natural Park to the Sanctuary, 725 m/2,380 ft above sea level, where on clear days the Pyrenees form the backdrop.

In the Royal Basilica we visit the Chapel of Our Lady of Montserrat, home of La Moreneta, the Black Virgin. This 12th-century Romanesque wooden statue is Catalonia's patron saint and draws devotees from across the Catholic world. An audiovisual exhibition, Montserrat Portes Endins (Montserrat from Within), sets the sanctuary in its history.

We also taste four locally produced liqueurs, a flavour of Benedictine monastery craftsmanship. Back in Barcelona the rest of the day is ours for museums, neighbourhood strolls or Mediterranean cafe life.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Barcelona - Train to Madrid: Royal Palace

Spain's high-speed rail carries us from Barcelona to Madrid in about three hours. This afternoon we tour the Royal Palace, the sovereign's official residence, now used only for state ceremonies.

The palace arose over the 18th and 19th centuries after fire destroyed the medieval Alcazar in 1734. We see the principal staircase, throne room, gala dining room, silver museum and principal courtyard -- all decorated to Charles III's lavish tastes. The rooms hold royal collections built up over centuries: tapestries, paintings, furniture and decorative arts.

With more than 3,400 rooms across 135,000 sq m, this is among Europe's largest royal residences, a scale that reflects the imperial ambitions of the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties and the wealth that flowed in from the Americas. Beyond its walls, Madrid's broad boulevards and grand squares give way to a street life that runs well into the evening, in the Spanish way.

NOTE: The palace is sometimes closed without notice for official functions. If so, we apologize that the visit cannot go ahead.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Madrid & The Prado

Madrid reveals its imperial grandeur on a panoramic tour that ends at the Prado. On the way we pass Plaza Espana and the Cervantes

Monument, honouring the author of Don Quixote, whose tale of impossible dreams pursued with noble determination has come to stand for the Spanish spirit.

The Prado opened in 1819 and holds the finest works collected by Spanish royalty, alongside Spanish paintings gathered from many sources over two centuries. Its Italian masterpieces reflect Spain's long ties to the Italian peninsula, but we concentrate on the Spanish masters who define the national artistic identity.

Velazquez's court portraits reveal the complexity of imperial Spain. Goya moves from royal commissions to haunting scenes of war, Ribera works in dramatic chiaroscuro, El Greco elongates his mystical figures and Zurbaran keeps his religious scenes contemplative.

After our guided tour we stroll up Gran Via into the old quarter and the capital's street life. The rest of the day is free for lunch and independent exploration, and our Tour Leader has recommendations for shopping, historic sites and galleries. The nearby Reina Sofia holds important modern art, including Picasso's Guernica, and the Museo Naval documents Spanish maritime history from the Armada onward.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Madrid: Toledo Day Trip

Toledo sits on a rocky promontory almost encircled by the Tagus, and the geography explains the history. Romans fortified the rock, Visigothic kings made it their capital, Muslim rulers held it for nearly four centuries and Alfonso VI took it for Castile in 1085. Each era left buildings behind and none was fully erased by the next, so a synagogue, a cathedral and a masterpiece stand within a few streets of one another.

We begin at the Cathedral, started in 1226, a Gothic statement of Castilian ambition in soaring vaults and carved stonework. A short walk away, the Santa Maria la Blanca Synagogue was built by Toledo craftsmen in an Almohad-influenced Moorish style, its horseshoe arches a reminder that Jewish, Muslim and Christian builders drew on a shared repertoire.

The Church of Santo Tome holds El Greco's Burial of the Count of Orgaz, painted in the 1580s for this very church. The artist was born on Crete and trained in Venice and Rome before settling in Toledo, and the canvas carries that range: a sober Spanish funeral below, and above it elongated saints and angels that recall Byzantine icons.

The afternoon is ours after lunch. Toledo's lanes are steep and cobbled, so we take them slowly, with time for the shops, markets and hidden corners of the old town before we return to Madrid.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Madrid - Train to Cordoba: City Tour

Spain's rail network carries us south across the Despenaperros Mountains, the dramatic pass between Castile and Andalusia, as the landscape shifts from central plateau to southern valleys. In Cordoba, a UNESCO World Heritage city, Roman, Visigothic, Islamic and Christian layers stand on the same ground.

We begin at the Roman Bridge and the Calahorra Tower, a fortified Islamic-era gatehouse that has guarded the Guadalquivir crossing for centuries. The centrepiece is the Mezquita-Catedral, the Great Mosque of Cordoba, among the oldest surviving buildings of Islamic Al-Andalus.

A Visigothic church stood here first. Then Abd al-Rahman I, an Umayyad prince who fled the overthrow of his dynasty in Damascus in 750, made Cordoba his western capital and began the mosque in the 780s. Its horseshoe arches in alternating red and white stone influenced Islamic architecture around the Mediterranean, and after the Christian conquest a cathedral was built inside it.

We visit the Alcazar built by Alfonso XI, with its mosaics and Roman sarcophagi, then stroll through the Jewish Quarter to its synagogue, one of the few surviving from medieval Iberia.

NOTE: Our meal plan includes breakfast and dinner, but depending on hotel location your Tour Leader may substitute lunch for dinner today, with advance notice.

Overnight in Cordoba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Cordoba - Granada

We travel from Cordoba to Granada, set in the heart of Andalusia beneath the Sierra Nevada, whose snowcapped peaks make it Spain's most romantically placed city. Under the Nasrid dynasty Granada grew wealthy and refined and became the last Muslim stronghold in Iberia, until Ferdinand and Isabella took it in 1492 and completed the Reconquista. Its cobbled streets and plazas witnessed the end of Al-Andalus, and the city marked the 500th anniversary in 1992.

On arrival we visit the Royal Chapel, where the Tuscan sculptor Domenico Fancelli carved the marble tomb of Ferdinand and Isabella. Neither monarch lived to see the chapel finished, so both were first buried in the Friary of San Francisco within the Alhambra and moved here later, alongside Philip and Juana. They had hoped all their successors would lie here too, but El Escorial became the royal burial place instead.

Mountain backdrop, Moorish heritage and the flamenco traditions of its Roma community give Granada an atmosphere all its own.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Granada: The Alhambra

The Alhambra is Granada's supreme sight, a mighty fortress that shelters an astonishingly delicate palace begun in the 13th century by the Nasrid sultans of Spain's last Muslim kingdom. This "lace in stone", set among arabesque gardens and fountains, looks across the Old Quarter to Sacromonte, the hill of Roma cave dwellings whose flamenco echoes through Granada's evenings.

In the Court of Lions, the Hall of Ambassadors and the palace's other chambers, geometric patterns, muqarnas ceilings and Arabic calligraphy turn structure into meditation and blur the line between earthly and divine. The Alhambra expresses a Moorish idea of life itself: something glorious, ennobled by learning and enlivened by every earthly pleasure.

The adjoining Generalife Gardens show the Nasrids' skill with water. Channels, fountains and reflecting pools cool the air in Andalusia's summer heat, and these pleasure gardens gave the rulers a paradise on earth.

We finish with a stroll through the Albaicin, the old Moorish quarter, where narrow streets climb past traditional white houses. The rest of the day is free to explore.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Granada - Reserva Tauro - Ronda: Town Tour

Our route winds through the mountains of Malaga Province to Ronda, perched on a high plateau above gorges cut over millions of years.

On the way we visit Reserva Tauro, a 200 ha/500-acre breeding farm for bulls and horses, for an introduction to the Andalusian traditions that surround bulls. We learn the culture and history behind bullfighting, a controversial practice that remains part of Spanish heritage in certain regions, without attending a bullfight.

In Ronda's old town, Romans, Arabs and Christians each left their mark. Our walking tour includes the Casa Museo Don Bosco, devoted to Saint John Bosco, the 19th-century Italian priest known for his work in the education and welfare of young people.

Ronda's drama lies in its escarpments. The deep El Tajo gorge carries the Rio Guadalevin through the middle of town, and we suggest walking to the Puente Nuevo, the 18th-century bridge that spans the 100 m/328 ft chasm. From it the views run across the Serrania de Ronda mountains.

Overnight in Ronda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Ronda - Pileta Caves - Olive Oil Tour - Sevilla

We leave Ronda for Sevilla by way of the Pileta Caves, where people painted the walls of these dark chambers over many thousands of years. The paintings run from the Paleolithic into the Neolithic, the oldest some 25,000 years old, in black, ochre and red. Most are abstract lines and patterns, alongside recognizable horses, goats and cattle and a rare giant fish. The chambers are natural, so we move through them slowly.

NOTE: The cave floor is wet stone with no handrails. Please consult your Tour Leader if you have any concern about footing.

We then follow the Route of the White Villages through the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park, whitewashed towns with flower pots at every window, mountain views behind them and traces of Islamic and Christian heritage in their streets.

Our stop is an olive oil producer near Zahara de la Sierra. The groves grow on steep slopes that must be tended and harvested by hand, and the area's heavy rainfall helps give an oil that is fruity, sweet and gentle. We learn traditional production methods and taste both the oil and locally made wine, then sit down to a regional lunch of tapas, local cheeses, fruits and sweets. Vegetarians are well accommodated.

NOTE: Today's included lunch replaces dinner.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 17 Sevilla: City Tour

Sevilla, Spain's fourth-largest city, is the cultural heart of Andalusia, its streets lined with restored Moorish architecture, orange trees and flower-filled patios, and the rhythm of castanets recalling its flamenco heritage.

We begin at the Cathedral, the world's largest Gothic cathedral, with its stained-glass windows, magnificent choir and many chapels. It rose where the city's great mosque once stood, and its bell tower, the Giralda, began as that mosque's Almohad minaret. Time permitting, we climb the Giralda for panoramic views across the city.

Next comes the Alcazar, a UNESCO World Heritage site and among Europe's oldest continuously used royal residences. Almohad, Mudejar and Renaissance builders each added to it, and its halls and gardens show Christian and Islamic artistic traditions joined so closely that the seams are hard to find.

Along the Guadalquivir we see the Maestranza Bullring, a symbol of Sevilla's bullfighting tradition, and the Torre del Oro, a 13th-century watchtower that once guarded the river approaches. For a contemporary note, we admire Eduardo Chillida's Monument to Tolerance, a sculpture of peace and understanding.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Depart

Our journey through Spain ends in Sevilla, where a Gothic cathedral and a former minaret share the same skyline. Depending on flight times, there may be a last chance to wander the orange-scented streets and flower-filled patios, or to look up at the Giralda once more, before we say farewell to our travelling companions and our Tour Leader.

Buen viaje! (Have a good journey!)

Depart.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast