

SPAIN: NORTH & SOUTH

'World Heritage Mosaic'

18 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Santiago de Compostela

Welcome to Spain! Arrival in Santiago de Compostela, one of Spain's most beautiful cities, built of golden granite and declared a national monument in its entirety. It's a wonderful place to walk with its arcades and flagstone streets.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Santiago de Compostela: City Tour

Santiago de Compostela unveils its treasures as we explore this UNESCO World Heritage city, where pilgrimage traditions have shaped architecture and culture for over a thousand years.

Our walking tour begins in magnificent Obradoiro Square, where the city's most notable landmarks converge in harmonious splendour. The Archbishop's residence preserves 12th-century chambers offering glimpses into medieval ecclesiastical power, while the Town Hall (formerly Raxoy Palace) displays classical elegance. San Jerónimo College showcases Roman architectural influences, creating an ensemble representing Santiago's evolution through centuries.

The centrepiece remains Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, adorned with numerous statues of St. James depicted as a pilgrim bearing staff, broad-brimmed hat, and scallop-shell badge—symbols recognised throughout Christian Europe. We explore the Cathedral Museum and Cloister, discovering intricate details revealing the sacred art's development over centuries.

We visit the Platerías Gate, the only preserved Romanesque entrance, its sculptures narrating biblical stories in stone. The highlight involves our guided tour of the Cathedral roofs, accessed through Gelmírez Palace beside the Cathedral. We pass through the palace interior, ascend past the Cathedral gallery above the Gloria doorway, and emerge onto the cathedral roof.

From this elevated vantage point, panoramic views reveal Santiago's historic centre spreading below us, allowing appreciation of the city's careful urban planning and architectural harmony that has attracted pilgrims since medieval times.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Santiago de Compostela - Train to Leon

We board a second-class train to León, a city where Roman foundations support Gothic magnificence and architectural treasures span millennia.

Upon arrival, we visit San Isidoro Collegiate Church, western Europe's finest Romanesque architecture example serving as the final resting place for 23 kings and queens. The church's historical significance and beautiful design reflect León's importance during medieval Iberia's Christian kingdoms.

Next, we explore León's stunning 13th-century cathedral, built in Gothic style reminiscent of French cathedrals, particularly Chartres. The cathedral's most striking feature comprises over 100 vibrant stained-glass panels filtering light through jewel-toned windows, creating an interior atmosphere of transcendent beauty unmatched in Spanish Gothic architecture.

Continuing through the old quarter, substantial portions of medieval walls remain visible alongside remnants of the original Roman fortifications. We also visit Casa de Botines, a neo-Gothic building designed by Antoni Gaudí, showcasing his unique architectural vision beyond Barcelona. This charming area provides glimpses into León's layered history, from Roman military camp through medieval Christian kingdom to modern cultural centre.

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León's strategic position on pilgrimage routes to Santiago ensured its prosperity and cultural development, evident in the remarkable monuments we encounter today.

* NOTE: YOU MUST BE ABLE TO MANAGE YOUR OWN BAGS ONTO/OFF TRAINS AND IN TRAIN STATIONS.

Overnight in Leon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Leon - Cave of Altamira - Bilbao

Traveling toward Bilbao, we pause at the renowned Cave of Altamira, where humanity's artistic heritage reaches back 12,000 years through vivid prehistoric paintings that astounded the archaeological world.

Discovered in the 1870s, these nearly perfectly preserved paintings of wild animals and human handprints prompted Pablo Picasso to declare: "After Altamira, everything is decadence." The caves' importance to understanding Paleolithic art cannot be overstated—these masterpieces represent some of humanity's earliest artistic expression, created when ice still covered much of Europe.

We visit the museum and precise replica showcasing these archaeological treasures, as the actual cave remains closed for conservation. The reproduction allows intimate viewing of bison, horses, and boar painted with remarkable skill using natural pigments and cave contours to create three-dimensional effects.

Continuing deeper into Basque country, we approach Bilbao, tucked within the lush coastal mountains of Euskadi. Known as "Bilbo" in Basque, locals affectionately call their city "botxo"—meaning hole or orifice—referencing its position within protective valleys. Originally scattered fishing hamlets clustering on the left bank, the settlement sought protection from Norman raiders and other Atlantic pirates.

This industrial port has transformed dramatically in recent decades, evolving from heavy manufacturing centre to cultural destination while maintaining its distinctive Basque character and fierce independence.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bilbao: The Guggenheim

Medieval Bilbao emerges as we explore the Old Town's cobbled streets, charming corners, and intimate squares, tracing development through centuries from fishing village to industrial powerhouse to cultural destination.

The day's masterpiece awaits at the Guggenheim Museum, the 31,329-square-metre (349,000 square feet) architectural marvel anchoring Bilbao's \$1.5 billion urban redevelopment. Frank Gehry's design features a soaring 50-metre (165-foot) atrium, exceeding Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim rotunda in New York by more than half again.

The museum showcases American and European 20th-century art through rotating exhibitions featuring renowned artists including Kandinsky, Mondrian, Picasso, Ernst, Pollock, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, and Serra. Gehry's titanium-clad exterior curves and angles create different perspectives from every viewpoint, earning acclaim as architectural sculpture itself.

This afternoon offers choices for independent exploration: remaining at the Guggenheim for extended viewing, visiting the Basque Museum celebrating regional culture, exploring the Fine Arts Museum's classical collections, enjoying a guided boat tour along the Nervión estuary revealing Bilbao's industrial heritage, or taking a bus excursion to elegant San Sebastian (approximately 1 hour 20 minutes each way). Your Tour Leader provides guidance for planning your preferred afternoon experience.

The Guggenheim's "Bilbao Effect" demonstrates architecture's power to transform cities, creating cultural magnetism that attracts global visitors while revitalising urban economies and civic pride.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Bilbao - Fly to Barcelona: City Tour

Flying to Barcelona, we meet our local guide for a panoramic exploration of this vibrant Mediterranean metropolis where Catalan culture and architectural innovation create an irresistible urban tapestry.

Our drive reveals Barcelona's diverse atmosphere and extraordinary architecture defining this dynamic city. We traverse Plaza España, the grand square surrounded by notable buildings and colourful mosaic fountains that epitomise Barcelona's artistic heritage.

Passing the 1992 Olympic Games sites recalls the transformative moment when Barcelona showcased itself globally, spurring urban renewal that continues today. From Montjuïc viewpoint, panoramic vistas encompass Barcelona's skyline, the sparkling Mediterranean, and Gaudí's iconic Sagrada Família rising like a stone forest above the urban grid.

We continue along Gran Via, among Barcelona's busiest thoroughfares lined with shops, restaurants, and historic buildings reflecting the city's commercial vitality. Our exploration culminates at Park Güell, Antoni Gaudí's UNESCO World Heritage Site where whimsical architectural elements merge with Mediterranean landscape.

Wandering through the park's colourful mosaic pathways, we encounter the famous ceramic lizard sculpture and admire Gaudí's unique architectural vision that transforms public space into artistic wonderland. The undulating benches, organic shapes, and imaginative use of broken ceramic create a fantasy environment overlooking Barcelona's urban expanse.

This introduction reveals Barcelona's character as a city where medieval foundations support modernist innovation, creating unique Catalan identity.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Barcelona: City Tour

Barcelona's historic heart reveals itself through the atmospheric Barrio Gótico, where Roman foundations support Gothic magnificence creating one of Europe's best-preserved medieval quarters.

Wandering narrow, winding streets, we marvel at Gothic architecture reaching toward Mediterranean skies while discovering iconic landmarks including Barcelona Cathedral and the Royal Palace. These medieval structures create an intimate urban environment where history remains tangible through weathered stone and shadowed alleyways.

We then transfer to Antoni Gaudí's masterpiece, the Sagrada Família, Barcelona's most recognisable landmark and an architectural phenomenon without precedent. Our guided tour reveals this extraordinary basilica's intricate design, revolutionary engineering, and spiritual symbolism. Soaring spires twist skyward like organic growths while stained-glass windows cast rainbow patterns across forest-like columns inspired by nature's geometry.

Learning about Gaudí's visionary approach to sacred architecture, we understand how this project, begun in 1882, continues evolving through contemporary craftspeople committed to completing his extraordinary vision. The nearby Museu Picasso adds another artistic dimension, showcasing the formative works of Spain's most celebrated modern artist.

The afternoon allows independent exploration of Barcelona's numerous attractions. Art enthusiasts may visit the National Art Museum of Catalonia, containing vast collections of Catalan art from medieval to contemporary periods, or the Joan Miró Foundation celebrating one of Spain's most innovative 20th-century artists.

Alternatively, enjoy leisurely time in Parc de la Ciutadella or stroll along La Rambla, Barcelona's famous street pulsing with shops, cafes, and street performers.

Overnight in Barcelona.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Barcelona: Montserrat & Leisure Time

Montserrat beckons from Barcelona's mountainous horizon, its jagged silhouette explaining the name meaning "serrated mountain." This massive rock fortress, dotted with paths, stairs, caves, chapels, and hermitages, has inspired spiritual pilgrimage for over a millennium.

Driving through Montserrat Natural Park, we ascend to the Sanctuary positioned 725 metres (2,380 feet) above sea level. Clear days reveal breathtaking panoramas of the Pyrenees mountains creating Catalonia's spectacular backdrop.

At the Sanctuary, we visit the Royal Basilica and Chapel of Our Lady of Montserrat housing the famous 12th-century Romanesque carved wooden statue of La Moreneta (the Black Virgin). This celebrated figure serves as Catalonia's patron saint, her presence strongly felt and revered throughout the region. The remarkable statue has transformed the Royal Basilica into one of Spain's most important pilgrimage destinations, attracting devotees from across the Catholic world.

Our tour includes entrance to an fascinating audiovisual exhibition titled "Montserrat Portes Endins" (Montserrat from Within), providing historical context for this sacred site's development. We also enjoy tastings of four locally produced liqueurs, experiencing traditional Benedictine monastery craftsmanship that continues centuries-old traditions.

Returning to Barcelona with leisure time, we appreciate the contrast between mountain spirituality and urban sophistication. Whether exploring additional museums, strolling through neighbourhoods, or simply enjoying Mediterranean cafe culture, Barcelona offers endless possibilities for personal discovery.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Barcelona - Train to Madrid: Royal Palace

Spain's high-speed rail network whisks us to Madrid in approximately three hours, showcasing the comfortable efficiency connecting Iberia's major cities.

This afternoon, we explore the magnificent Royal Palace, official residence of Spanish royalty though now used exclusively for state ceremonies. Known in Spanish as Palacio Real, this monumental building arose during the 18th and 19th centuries after fire destroyed the former medieval Alcázar in 1794.

Our tour reveals the palace's principal staircase, throne room, gala dining room, silver museum, and principal courtyard—all decorated according to Charles III's lavish tastes. The extraordinary rooms showcase Spanish royal collections accumulated over centuries, including tapestries, paintings, furniture, and decorative arts representing European craftsmanship's finest achievements.

The palace's grandiose scale reflects Spanish imperial ambitions during the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties, when wealth from American colonies funded magnificent architectural projects. Over 3,400 rooms spread across 135,000 square metres make this among Europe's largest royal residences.

Madrid's energy as Spain's political and cultural capital becomes immediately apparent through broad boulevards, grand squares, and the vibrant street life that continues well into evening hours following Spanish custom.

* Please note that the palace is periodically closed without notice due to official functions. We apologize if this activity is not possible.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 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 11 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.

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 12 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 13 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 14 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 15 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.

Overnight in Ronda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 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.

Pausing briefly in Grazalema, a white hill town nestled within Grazalema National Park, we continue to 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 17 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 18 Depart

Our Iberian odyssey concludes as we depart from Sevilla.

BUEN VIAJE! (Have a good journey!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast