

SPAIN & MOROCCO**'Andalucia & the Imperial Cities'****18 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.

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.

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.

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 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

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Day 10 Sevilla - Tarifa, Spain - Ferry to Tangier, Morocco

As we leave Spain behind, we make our way to the port city of Tarifa, where we'll board a ferry to cross the Strait of Gibraltar into Africa. The narrow strait, just 14 kilometres wide at its narrowest point, has played a significant role in shaping the history of both Europe and North Africa. For centuries, this waterway has connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, facilitating the exchange of cultures, goods, and ideas between civilizations.

As we sail across, the landscape shifts, and the Moroccan city of Tangier comes into view. With its rich history and strategic location, Tangier has been influenced by various cultures, including North African, Spanish, Portuguese, and French. We'll explore this vibrant city, taking in its colourful streets, historic landmarks, and beautiful vistas. From the medina's narrow alleys to the city's stunning beaches, Tangier's unique blend of cultures and traditions is on full display.

* In the event that we have only a small group continuing to Morocco, it may be more expedient for us to fly from Sevilla to Morocco instead. Depending on ever-changing air schedules, it is also possible that our stay in Sevilla could be extended by a day with a flight direct to Casablanca the following day. This potential situation will become clearer closer to departure.

Overnight in Tangier.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Tangier - Casablanca

Today we travel by road to Casablanca with a stop for lunch en route.

Our road trip along the scenic Atlantic coast unfolds before us, with the rugged Rif Mountains giving way to rolling hills and picturesque villages. We'll traverse the fertile plains of the Gharb region, known for its lush agriculture and charming towns.

Casablanca boasts a rich history dating back to the Phoenicians and Berbers. The city's strategic location made it a prized possession for various conquerors, including the Almohads, who developed it as a thriving port in the 12th century. The Portuguese later established a settlement, but their presence was marked by destruction and rebirth. Today it's a bustling city that serves as Morocco's economic hub. We'll get a glimpse of the city's modern landscape before heading to our next destination tomorrow.

Overnight in Casablanca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Casablanca - Rabat - Fes

This morning we visit the Hassan II Mosque, a glorious structure believed to be only second in size to Islam's most important site, Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The mosque was inaugurated in August 1993, the culmination of five years of intensive labour by over 30,000 workers and craftsmen. Non-Muslims may enter as part of a guided tour.

From Casablanca we travel to Rabat, Morocco's third oldest Imperial City and modern capital. Among the sites in Rabat that we will visit are the Hassan Tower and the Mohammed V Mausoleum. Leaving Rabat we travel to Fes arriving in time for dinner.

The historic city of Fes lies in the Oued Sebou basin, astride the traditional trade route from the Sahara to the Mediterranean and the path from Algeria and the Islamic heartland beyond. For centuries the dominant axis within Morocco was of Fes and Marrakech, two cities linked by their immense power and rivalry. Fes is still seen as the spiritual and cultural capital and holds an enduring fascination for visitors with one of the largest historic medinas full of monuments reflecting the different periods of Morocco's imperial past.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Fes - Volubilis - Meknes - Fes

This morning we visit the impressive site of Volubilis, the best-preserved Roman site in Morocco. Situated on the ledge of a long plateau, the dramatic site was once one of the Roman Empire's most remote outposts. Our local guide here will take you on tour of the site; we also allow free time for photographs.

We also see the sacred town of Moulay Idriss (photo stop only). Moulay Idriss is a dramatic sight, houses and mosques piled up around two rock outcrops, with the 'zaouia,' or sanctuary, in between.

We continue to Meknes, Morocco's youngest Imperial City. We feature the Bab El Mansour gate dating from 1752, complete with its Corinthian columns. The city was built by a massive army of slaves, both Moroccan and Christian, and the Sultan was in particular famed for his barbaric treatment of these people, supposedly interring them in the walls. The city contained within it all that was necessary for such a large population and military machine, with store houses, stables, armouries, exercise areas, gardens and ponds.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Fes: City Tour

Today we will have a full-day guided walking tour of Fes El Bali, the extraordinary medieval walled city (we'll have several breaks for a quick rest/refreshment and a longer one for lunch). Once inside the gates of this great spectacle, you will see an entirely different view of life in Morocco. In contrast to the well-planned Ville Nouvelle, the old city is a labyrinth of alleys and lanes lined with shops, mosques, homes and schools. In 1980 UNESCO designated the medina a World Heritage Site.

Our on-foot exploration of Fes begins with a breathtaking panoramic view of the entire city from its northern vantage point. This offers a fantastic orientation, allowing you to appreciate the sprawling Medina and its surrounding hills. We then delve into the craftsmanship of the Potters' Quarter, where you can witness traditional ceramic making techniques passed down through generations. Following this, we'll see the impressive gates of the Royal Palace (exterior view) and explore the Mellah, the historic Jewish quarter, with its distinct architecture and atmosphere.

Also along our route, we'll visit the exquisite Medersa Bou Inania, a stunning example of Marinid architecture. We'll also view the exterior of the revered Kairouine Mosque, one of the oldest universities in the world (non-Muslims cannot enter).

Our walk continues to the sacred Tomb of Moulay Idriss II, the founder of Fes (exterior view), the ornately tiled Nejjarine Fountain, the bustling Blacksmiths' squares, and the intricate Weaving Quarter. Our sensory journey culminates at the famous Dyers' souk and the traditional tanneries, where you can witness the age-old methods of dyeing leather, a truly unique spectacle.

Finally, as our tour concludes, we'll take in another panoramic view of Fes, this time from the South side of the city, offering a different perspective on this captivating city.

Overnight in Fes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Fes - Erfoud

Today we embark on a scenic journey through the diverse landscapes of Morocco, heading towards the gateway to the Sahara. Our route takes us through the Middle Atlas Mountains, where we'll experience its unique character.

Our first stop will be Ifrane, a charming town with an unexpected alpine feel, often likened to a Swiss resort. Here, you'll have some time to explore its neat streets, perhaps see the iconic stone lion, and enjoy the refreshing atmosphere.

Continuing our ascent into the Middle Atlas, we'll enter the Cedar Forest, home to the playful Barbary macaques. We'll make a stop here for a chance to observe these fascinating creatures in their natural habitat amidst the ancient cedar trees.

Our journey then takes us towards Midelt, travelling through apple-growing regions and offering opportunities for scenic photo stops, including the panoramic Col de Ziad. As we approach Midelt, the imposing Djebel Ayachi of the High Atlas will come into view. We'll pause in Midelt for lunch.

In the afternoon, we'll continue our drive towards Erfoud, crossing the Tizi N Talrhem pass and noting the dramatic Ziz Gorge. As we near Erfoud, you'll begin to see the landscapes transitioning towards the pre-Saharan environment, with views of the Ziz Valley oases and traditional adobe-style constructions (ksour).

Late afternoon arrival in Erfoud, the threshold to the Sahara.

THIS EVENING you should prepare an overnight bag with everything you will need for our time and overnight at Merzouga and the following morning before our return to Erfoud.

Overnight in kasbah style hotel with full amenities.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Rissani & Merzouga Dunes

This morning we'll explore the region around Erfoud and Rissani, delving into the history and local culture. We'll begin with a visit to Rissani, the historical capital of the Tafilalt region and the origin of Morocco's current ruling dynasty. Here we'll see the peaceful Alaouite Mausoleum and wander through the vibrant local market (souk), a colourful hub of daily life offering everything from produce to handicrafts. We'll also explore a traditional Ksar, an ancient fortified village, to appreciate its unique architecture.

Depending on local opportunities, we might also visit a fossil workshop near Erfoud, this area being known for its unique black marble embedded with fossils. You'll learn about this fascinating aspect of the region's geology.

After lunch, we'll transfer to 4x4 vehicles and begin our journey towards the majestic Erg Chebbi dunes of Merzouga. This exhilarating ride will take us partly off-road, offering fantastic views of the Sahara's changing landscapes. If possible, we'll pause for a traditional tea break in a nomad encampment under a tent and make a stop for a panoramic photo opportunity of the impressive sand dunes.

Upon arrival at Merzouga, an exciting camel excursion awaits. We'll embark on a roughly 20-minute ride that takes us to a vantage point to witness a spectacular sunset over the golden dunes. Following the sunset, it will be another 20-minute ride back. The camels are led by local young men who will accompany us on this memorable experience.

Tonight, we'll settle into our accommodation in Merzouga, with dinner scheduled to allow time for those returning from the camel trek to freshen up and relax. You can spend the evening under the stars by the campfire with our camp hosts.

Overnight at Merzouga desert camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Merzouga - Todra Gorge - Ouarzazate

This morning we'll embark on an exciting journey from Merzouga to Ouarzazate, exploring the stunning landscapes and cultural heritage of the Moroccan desert. Our adventure begins with a scenic 4WD drive from Merzouga back to Erfoud, where we'll transfer to our bus (with our main pieces of luggage) and take a moment to freshen up.

From Erfoud, we'll head to the ancient Khattara irrigation system, a remarkable feat of engineering that showcases the ingenuity of our ancestors. We'll have a photo stop at Tirnehir and then visit the breathtaking Todra Gorges, where towering cliffs rise above the river.

After lunch in Tirnehir, we'll continue our journey along the Dades River Valley, passing through picturesque villages and oases. We'll make photo stops at Boulmane du Dades and Kelaa Mgouna, where we can learn about the local rose water production.

Our final stop will be at the stunning Kasbah Skoura, a 17th-century fortress that offers breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. We'll take a guided walk around the kasbah and explore the nearby village.

As we arrive in Ouarzazate, we'll check into our hotel after a day filled with spectacular scenery and cultural insights.

Overnight in Ouarzazate.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Ouarzazate - Casablanca - Depart

Today we fly back to Casablanca and connect with flights that generally leave in the evening.

NOTE: The flight to Casa is included in your trip cost; if booking your own flights from Casablanca, land only passengers need to take into account the timing of the flight from Ouarzazate before booking their air from Casa.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast