

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

This morning we have a panoramic tour of broader Madrid, terminating at the Prado Museum for a guided tour. Our route to the museum likely takes us past Plaza Espana point and the Cervantes Monument.

Originally opened to the public in 1819, the Prado houses all of the finest works collected by Spanish Royalty as well as Spanish paintings gathered from other sources over the past two centuries. The Prado is one of the most important repositories of art in the world, including a vast collection of Italian paintings. For the purposes of our visit, however, we will concentrate on works by Spanish masters -- Velasquez, Goya, Ribera, El Greco, Zurbaran, to name a few.

After our tour, we'll head off on foot for an informal stroll up Gran Via and into the old quarter of Madrid. You'll then have free time for lunch and an afternoon of independent exploration. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your free time, with recommended shopping, other historical sites and galleries. You may want to visit the nearby Reina Sofia for the important modern art collection, including Picasso's masterpiece, "Guernica." Or visit the Museo Naval, one of the world's most important Navy Museums, to learn about the history of the Spanish Armada.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Madrid: Toledo Day Trip

This morning, we embark on a day trip to Toledo, a city that proudly showcases its rich cultural heritage. Perched on a rocky promontory, surrounded on three sides by the majestic Tagus River, Toledo's unique blend of Arab, Jewish, Christian, Roman, and Visigothic elements is palpable. As we explore this ancient city, we'll discover the fascinating history and architecture that reflects its diverse past.

Toledo's narrow streets and alleys are lined with houses, synagogues, churches, and mosques, each telling a story of the city's complex history. We'll visit the stunning Cathedral, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, and the Santa Maria la Blanca Synagogue, which showcases the influence of Moorish design from Granada. One of Toledo's most prized treasures is El Greco's breathtaking masterpiece, "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz," housed in the Church of Santo Tome.

As we wander through the city, we'll uncover the secrets of Toledo's past, from its Roman and Visigothic roots to its Moorish and Christian influences. The city's architecture, art, and culture are a testament to the many civilizations that have shaped its identity.

After a break for lunch, we'll have some free time to explore Toledo's charming streets, visit its shops and markets, and soak up the city's unique atmosphere before returning to Madrid.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Madrid - Train to Cordoba: City Tour

Today we travel by fast train to Cordoba (+/- 2 hours), crossing the Despenaperros Mountains and the border pass between Castile and Andalucia.

During our time in Cordoba (a World Heritage City), we will gain a sense of the city's long and varied past and multicultural nature. Our tour starts at the Roman Bridge and the Calahorra Tower, an Arab defensive tower. Next we arrive at the Mezquita-Catedral, or Great Mosque of Cordoba, one of the oldest structures still standing from the time Muslims ruled Al-Andalus. The buildings on this site are as complex as the extraordinarily rich history they illustrate. Historians believe that there had first been a temple to the Roman god, Janus, on this site. The temple was converted into a church by invading Visigoths who seized Cordoba in 572. Next, the church was converted into a mosque and then completely rebuilt by the descendants of the exiled Umayyads -- the first Islamic dynasty who had originally ruled from their capital Damascus (in present-day Syria) from 661 until 750.

We visit the Alcazar fortress, built by King Alfonso XI, and containing mosaics and sarcophagi. Finally we will have a stroll in the Jewish Quarter where the synagogue is located.

Please note: Our official meal plan for today is "breakfast & dinner"; however, due to other variables, however (such as hotel location), your Tour Leader may choose to include lunch instead of dinner today. You will, of course, be advised in advance.

Overnight in Cordoba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Cordoba - Granada

Our tour continues to Granada, set in the heart of Andalucia with the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains as a backdrop. Conquered by the Moors in AD 711, Granada blossomed into one of Europe's wealthiest and most refined cities. The legacy of Granada's rich history and heritage remain visible throughout the city centre with its cobblestone streets and lovely plazas. In 1992 Granada celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Christian re-conquest by the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand, and Isabella.

On arrival we visit the Royal Chapel, featuring tombs carved out of marble by the Tuscan sculptor Domenico Fancelli. As both Queen Isabel and King Fernando died before the Royal Chapel was finished, they were first buried in the Friary of San Francisco in the Alhambra. They were then later moved to the chapel once it had been completed, and buried alongside King Felipe and Queen Juana. Although their original idea was for all future Spanish Kings and Queens to be buried here, this did not happen as the monastery in El Escorial was used instead.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Granada: The Alhambra

The focus of our sightseeing today is Granada's main attraction, the Alhambra, a mighty fortress that houses an extraordinarily delicate and beautiful Moorish palace begun in the 13th century. This was the palace of the Nasrid Sultans, rulers of the last Spanish Moorish Kingdom. A fantasy of "lace in stone" surrounded by arabesque gardens and fountains, it affords superb views of the Old Quarter and Sacromonte, a mountain occupied by gypsy cave dwellers. In many ways, the Alhambra represents the Moorish concept of life itself -- something glorious to be ennobled by learning and enlivened by every kind of pleasure. We also visit the nearby Generalife Gardens followed by an informal stroll in the city's old Moorish quarter of the Albaicin.

The balance of the day is at leisure for independent exploration.

Overnight in Granada.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Granada - Reserva Tauro - Ronda: Town Tour

We continue our tour (by road) to Ronda, a historic town located on a towering plateau in the mountains of Malaga Province.

En route we visit Reserva Tauro, a 500 acre bull and horse breeding farm. Here we have the opportunity to get close to bulls and gain an understanding of the culture without attending a bull fight. Of course this cultural/historical practice is controversial, but the farm does a good job in presenting bull fighting in an even, objective way without in any way promoting or excusing it.

In Ronda, we will walk around the old town where you will learn the origins of this ancient town where Romans, Arabs, and Christians left their traces. We'll visit the Casa Museo Don Bosco, which offers a unique glimpse into the life and work of Saint John Bosco, a 19th-century Italian Catholic priest known for his work with young people. We'll explore the museum's collections, which include personal items of Don Bosco, historical documents, and artifacts related to his work.

Ronda is of course famous for its dramatic escarpments and views, and for the deep El Tajo gorge that carries the Rio Guadalevin through its centre. We suggest a walk to the 18th century Puente Nuevo 'new' bridge, which straddles the 100m/328 ft chasm below, for its unparalleled views out over the Serrania de Ronda mountains.

Overnight in Ronda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Today we travel to Seville via a stop at the well-preserved rock paintings at the Pileta Caves (walking required on wet stone with no hand rails - speak to your leader for further guidance). The 25,000 year old Neolithic and Paleolithic drawings of black, ochre, and red are mostly just lines or patterns, but there are also horses, goats, cattle, and a rare giant fish, made from a mixture of clay and fat. This is not a well-developed tourist attraction; you must be steady on your feet and prepared for some slow walking.

We then follow the route known as "the Route of the White Villages" for the singularity of the scenery. The villages -- Pueblos Blancos -- are a series of whitewashed towns and villages in the northern part of the provinces of Cádiz and Málaga, mostly within the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. These charming settlements feature whitewashed houses festooned with pots of colourful flowers, mountain vistas, and traces of the Islamic and Christian past.

For a bit of a break we stop briefly in the White Town of Grazalema, a white hill down nestled in Grazalema National Park, before continuing to a visit to one of the region's olive oil producers for a tour and lunch (included instead of dinner today). The region is renown for extra virgin olive oil, which transmits all the aroma, the flavour, and the essence of the olive groves of Zahara de la Sierra. The process is difficult and extreme, with steep slopes which require manual caretaking and harvesting; the reward is a very fruity, sweet, and gentle flavour partly due to high rainfall in the area. We will learn all about this process and have a chance to taste both the oil and the wine also made locally. Our visit will culminate with a lunch typical of the region with an assortment of tapas, local cheeses, fruits and other sweets (vegatarians are well-catered for).

After a relaxing lunch, we proceed to Sevilla arriving late afternoon. Though we don't include dinner this evening, our hotel is well-placed and your Tour Leader will provide suggestions for your free time.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 9 Sevilla: City Tour

Seville, a vibrant tapestry of Andalusian charm, is the fourth-largest city in Spain and the cultural heart of the region. Its picturesque streets

are lined with restored Moorish architecture, fragrant orange groves, and flower-filled patios. The city's lively atmosphere is further enhanced by the rhythmic sounds of castanets, a hallmark of Seville's flamenco heritage.

During our visit, we'll immerse ourselves in Seville's rich history and architectural wonders. The Seville Cathedral, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, boasts stunning stained glass windows, a magnificent choir, and numerous chapels. (Time-permitting) ascend the iconic Giralda Tower for breathtaking panoramic views of the city.

Step back in time at the Alcázar Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Europe's oldest royal residences. Explore its intricate Moorish architecture, lush gardens, and grand halls. Along the banks of the Guadalquivir River, we'll encounter historic landmarks such as the Maestranza Bullring, a symbol of Seville's bullfighting tradition, and the Torre del Oro, a 13th-century watchtower.

For a contemporary touch, admire the Monument to Tolerance by Eduardo Chillida, a striking sculpture that symbolizes peace and understanding. The Guadalquivir riverbank and view historic monuments like the Maestranza Bullring, the Torre del Oro, and the Monument to the Tolerance by Eduardo Chillida.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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 Talrhemt 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