

PORTUGAL & SPAIN

'Iberia in Depth'

25 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Lisbon

Welcome to Lisbon, where Atlantic breezes carry whispers of maritime empires across cobblestone squares.

Portugal's legendary capital has beckoned explorers for over eight centuries, and today we join that grand tradition of discovery. Since wresting control from the Moors in 1147, Lisbon has woven itself into the fabric of world history as Europe's first truly global city. From these very hills, Vasco da Gama charted routes to India, while Magellan dreamed of circumnavigating the globe. The colonial elegance that still graces the city's architecture speaks to an era when Portuguese caravels connected continents from Brazil to Macau.

This evening, we gather fellow travellers for our first dinner together, sharing anticipation for the journey ahead through Iberia's most captivating landscapes and storied cities.

Overnight in Lisbon.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Lisbon: City Tour

Lisbon unfolds before us like a living museum of maritime ambition, where Europe's second-oldest capital reveals its secrets through winding neighbourhoods and panoramic viewpoints.

We begin our exploration in the bohemian quarters of Bairro Alto and Chiado, where 16th-century working-class districts have evolved into artistic havens. Writers and painters have found inspiration here for generations, their legacy echoing through narrow streets lined with traditional Portuguese tiles.

Next, we navigate the medieval labyrinth of Alfama, Lisbon's Moorish heart, where laundry-draped balconies overlook ancient alleyways climbing toward São Jorge Castle. The fortress crowning this district offers commanding views over terracotta rooftops stretching to the Tagus River.

We then descend to Baixa, the methodically planned "lower town" rebuilt after the devastating 1755 earthquake. This geometric grid of streets and grand squares represents Enlightenment urban planning at its finest, creating Lisbon's commercial heartbeat.

This afternoon brings free time for personal discoveries. While we don't include Belém and Jerónimos Monastery in our formal programme due to overwhelming crowds, your Tour Leader can advise on optimal visiting strategies should you wish to explore this UNESCO site independently.

Overnight in Lisbon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Lisbon - Obidos - Nazare - Fatima - Leiria

We venture northward through Portugal's heartland, where medieval fortifications and fishing traditions create an authentic tapestry of Portuguese culture.

Our first discovery awaits in Óbidos, a perfectly preserved medieval town encircled by 14th-century walls. We pass through the remarkable 18th-century gatehouse adorned with traditional azulejo tiles, entering a world where narrow cobblestone streets wind between brilliant white houses trimmed in cheerful blue. Gothic and Renaissance churches, particularly the beautiful Igreja de Santa Maria, remind us of Óbidos's historical significance as a royal wedding gift from King Dinis to Queen Isabel.

We then proceed to Nazaré, Portugal's most celebrated fishing village, where Atlantic waves have shaped both landscape and livelihood for

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centuries. En route, we pause at Batalha for photographs of its magnificent monastery before witnessing Nazaré's iconic scene: brightly painted boats drawn up on sandy beaches. From the clifftop neighbourhood of Sítio, panoramic views reveal why this location became legendary among Portugal's fishing communities. Traditional seven-skirted costumes still grace local women near the Nossa Senhora de Nazaré Basilica, an important pilgrimage destination.

Our final stop brings us to Fátima, the renowned Catholic shrine where three shepherd children experienced visions in 1917. We visit the Basilica and Chapel of Apparitions marking this sacred site before continuing to charming Leiria.

Overnight in Leiria.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Leiria - Coimbra - Bussaco - Viseu

Portugal's intellectual heritage beckons as we journey to Coimbra, where university spires have crowned hillsides since medieval times. Coimbra served as Portugal's capital for over a century, and its steeply terraced historic centre, dating to Moorish occupation, retains wonderfully atmospheric cobbled lanes overlooked by the monumental cathedral. This UNESCO World Heritage city houses continental Europe's oldest university, founded in 1290, making it older than Cambridge or the Sorbonne.

We explore the magnificent 12th-century Sé Velha Cathedral, its Romanesque solidity contrasting with the ornate Manueline doorways of the 13th-century university. The baroque library, with its gilt shelving and frescoed ceiling, represents one of Europe's most beautiful academic repositories. We also visit the Alameda Gate and Santa Cruz Church, plus the Machado de Castro Museum to witness the remarkable Roman tunnels upon which the building stands.

After a break for lunch and free time, we continue to Buçaco, renowned for its extraordinary botanical collection of over 400 native species plus 300 varieties brought by Portuguese explorers from Mexico, Japan, and Africa. The royal family cherished this forest retreat so deeply they constructed a summer palace and hunting lodge, now an elegant hotel. Here, in 1810, Wellington's forces defeated Napoleon's troops at the Battle of Buçaco, marking the turning point in the French invasion attempt.

Overnight in Viseu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Viseu - the Douro Valley - Porto

Viseu's ancient streets reveal why Romans chose this elevated position, its name deriving from "viso," meaning "good view." We stroll through the historical centre, discovering the Cathedral, Misericórdia Church, and remarkable Synagogue that speak to centuries of cultural diversity.

We then embark on a picturesque drive through landscapes dotted with traditional granite houses adorned with wooden balconies, entering the legendary Douro Valley. This UNESCO World Heritage site represents the world's first demarcated wine region, established in 1756 when Portuguese authorities recognised the unique terroir producing exceptional port wine.

Steep terraced hillsides, carved by generations of vintners, create amphitheatres of vines stretching along the meandering river. Famous company names—Cockburn's, Taylor's, Sandeman—announce their presence on weathered placards, testament to centuries of Anglo-Portuguese wine trade.

En route, we stop for a cellar tour, tasting, and included lunch at a traditional quinta, learning how schist soil and microclimate combine to create port's distinctive character. We also visit Amarante's bustling market, where local specialties reflect the region's agricultural abundance.

Arriving in Porto this evening, dinner remains at your leisure, allowing flexibility to explore this atmospheric riverside city independently.

Overnight in Porto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 6 Porto: City Tour

Porto reveals itself as a masterpiece of urban evolution, where 2,000 years of continuous habitation have created one of Europe's most atmospheric cities.

The Romans established Portus Cale at this strategic river mouth, giving Portugal its name. During Roman times, the settlement gained prominence facilitating trade between Lisbon and Braga, eventually becoming the launching point for Portugal's Age of Discovery.

Built along hillsides overlooking the Douro's mouth, Porto displays an outstanding urban landscape reflecting centuries of prosperity linked to Atlantic commerce. The UNESCO World Heritage historic centre preserves treasures spanning Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, and Neo-classical periods, creating Portugal's most architecturally rich cityscape after Lisbon.

Our walking tour includes the opulent Stock Exchange Palace with its lavish neoclassical interiors, the Cathedral commanding views over terracotta rooftops, and São Bento Station famous for its spectacular azulejo tile panels depicting Portuguese history. The medieval Ribeira district enchants with its labyrinthine streets and riverside Praça da Ribeira, where we visit the 13th-century Igreja de São Francisco. Unfortunately, the exquisitely gilded Igreja de Santa Clara remains closed for restoration, viewable only from outside.

This afternoon, we leisurely cruise the Douro River, witnessing Porto's remarkable skyline from the water.

Overnight in Porto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Porto: Braga & Guimaraes

Braga beckons with its extraordinary concentration of religious architecture—over 300 churches earning it recognition as Portugal's spiritual capital and Christendom's highest church-per-capita ratio.

Founded by Goidelic Celts called the Bracari several millennia ago, Braga's strategic location attracted successive occupations. Romans arrived in 250 BC, making it the hub of five major roads leading to Rome. Suevians conquered it in 409 AD, replaced by Visigoths in 485, who yielded to Moorish armies in 711. For three centuries, Christians and Muslims contested control until the 11th century Christian reconquest.

Our exploration centres on Santuário do Bom Jesus do Monte, a UNESCO World Heritage Site featuring a spectacularly situated church built in 1784. Carlos Amarante's Italian-inspired neoclassical design integrates harmoniously with northern Portugal's landscape. The remarkable stairway contains 17 landings adorned with symbolic fountains and allegorical statues in full Baroque splendour.

We ascend via the funicular—the first built on the Iberian Peninsula and the world's oldest water-counterbalanced system. From the summit, panoramic views encompass the ornate granite fountains cascading down the hillside and the gleaming white church crowning this pilgrimage site.

In Braga's medieval quarter, Renaissance and Manueline palaces neighbour baroque churches along narrow streets that have witnessed centuries of faith and commerce.

After a break for lunch, we proceed to Guimarães, birthplace of Portugal's first king and 2012 European Capital of Culture. In this UNESCO-listed medieval quarter, we begin at Largo da Oliveira, admiring varied architectural styles. Window boxes burst with colourful flowers as we pass workshops, bakeries, and stores operating unchanged by time's passage.

Overnight in Porto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Porto, Portugal - Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Crossing into Spain, we discover Santiago de Compostela, where golden granite creates one of Iberia's most beautiful cities.

Built entirely from local golden stone, Santiago appears almost magical in certain lights, its medieval streets declared a national monument in

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their entirety. The city remains remarkably integrated, enhanced by comprehensive pedestrianisation that preserves its contemplative atmosphere. Buildings, squares, arcades, and statues hewn from identical granite blocks blend imperceptibly, often making ground level indistinguishable from raised terraces.

En route, we pause in Baiona, among Galicia's most important coastal towns due to its harbour and fishing fleet. This port gained eternal fame when Columbus's caravel Pinta landed here first in Europe after the "discovery" of America. Time allows for coffee, Spanish tapas, and local shopping while absorbing this historic moment's significance.

Depending on our arrival time, we may begin Santiago's exploration after checking into our hotel, setting the stage for tomorrow's comprehensive discoveries.

Santiago's granite streets have welcomed pilgrims for over a millennium, and tonight we join that tradition, resting in preparation for encountering one of Christianity's most sacred destinations.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 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 10 Santiago de Compostela - Leon

Today we travel by road 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.

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

Overnight in Leon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 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 12 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.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 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 14 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.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 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 16 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 17 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 18 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 19 Madrid - Train to Cordoba: City Tour

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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 20 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 21 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 22 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 23 Ronda - Pileta Caves - Olive Oil Tour - Sevilla

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

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

We then follow "the Route of the White Villages" (Pueblos Blancos)—a series of whitewashed towns in the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. These charming settlements feature brilliant white houses adorned with colourful flower pots, mountain vistas, and traces of Islamic and Christian heritage creating quintessentially Andalusian landscapes. Here we visit one of the region's olive oil producers for a comprehensive

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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 24 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 25 Depart

Our Iberian odyssey concludes as we depart from Sevilla.

BUEN VIAJE! (Have a good journey!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast