

SENSATIONAL SPAIN**Barcelona, Madrid, Cordoba, Granada & Sevilla****13 days**

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Day 1 *Arrive in Barcelona*

Today we arrive in Barcelona and transfer to our hotel.

Barcelona, located on the Mediterranean sea in the very north of the Spanish coast, is certainly the most cosmopolitan and economically active city in this country. Of course, Barcelona has an old history, and there are monuments of Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance periods or still before, but most characteristic is what has been built during the last 100 years.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Meal Plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Barcelona: City Tour*

This morning we will embark on our comprehensive Barcelona sightseeing programme (mostly on foot - leisurely pace). Our first stop is Parc Guell, a beautiful place early in the morning. We have time to visit the Casa Gaudi with its collection of Gaudi-designed furniture. We'll walk through the Parc, ending up at the main entrance to visit the terrace and pavilion unit and Doric columns.

We continue by bus to Barcelona's most famous and most photographed attraction -- La Sagrada Familia Cathedral (Cathedral of the Holy Family), an amalgam of fantasy and Gothic impulses, and Gaudi's most unique piece of architecture. Our bus stops on the side of the Nativity facade (north) from where we walk around to the Passion facade. We visit the cathedral museum during our stop.

We continue down the avenue of Las Ramblas, the exotic "spine of Barcelona," with a stop to look at Casa Mila, another Gaudi creation, and then on to Placa Catalunya and to Placa Reial via the central market, St Josephis; a very lively place, crowded with stalls selling caged birds and lush plants and the constant clamor of people haggling and selling.

After a break for lunch, we stroll to Barri Gotic, a densely packed area of narrow lanes with a fascinating mixture of medieval and stately Renaissance buildings. Then on to the Picasso Museum for a +/- 60 minute visit. From here we walk to the impressive Gothic-style Cathedral for a visit including the adjacent enclosure where Ferdinand and Isabella received Columbus in December 1492.

We return to the hotel later in the afternoon. After dinner this evening we can sample some of Barcelona's nightlife.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 *Barcelona: Day at Leisure*

Today is at leisure to enjoy Barcelona -- shopping, wandering, people watching, etc. A popular optional excursion today is the nearby seaside town of Sitges, known for its authentic Mediterranean atmosphere, shady streets, traditional whitewashed houses, beaches and lively gay culture. Your Tour Leader will organize and escort any group members wishing to go, though transport costs are on your own account (45 minutes by train, approx 4 Euros per person). Some travellers with more energy and less interest in beach time may consider carrying on to nearby Tarragona, with its magnificent Roman aqueduct, Old Quarter, and its stunning cathedral.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Canada/USA
1-800-665-3998

United Kingdom
0114-247-3400

Day 4 *Barcelona - Madrid: The Royal Palace & Flamenco Show*

This morning we take the fast train to Madrid (+/- 2 hours). Upon arrival we'll drop our luggage and head off to the Royal Palace* where we will see, among other things, its principal staircase, throne, gala dining room, museum of silver, and principal courtyard.

You'll have some free time before dinner, which will feature a Flamenco show for which Spain, and especially Madrid, is famous.

* Periodically, without notice, the palace is closed for an official function causing us to shuffle our program slightly. Our overall Madrid area sightseeing may vary depending on certain museum visits that need to be booked well in advance.

Overnight in Madrid.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 *Madrid: The Prado & Old Town*

This morning en route to the Prado, we'll drive past Plaza Espana point and out to Cervantes Monument where we will alight briefly for a stroll around the monument and the gardens and interesting architecture that surround it. We drive down Gran Via to the Cybele fountain, then north to Plaza Colon and turn around to come back down towards the magnificent Prado Museum for a pre-booked guided tour.

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. Botticelli's dramatic wooden panels telling The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti, a vision of a knight forever condemned to hunt down and kill his own beloved, are a sinister high point.

After our visit to the Prado, your Tour Leader will take you in an informal stroll / tour up Gran Via and into the old town. The nearby gay quarter of Madrid is known for shopping and as a nice place for an afternoon beer. The balance of the day free to enjoy this beautiful city.

Overnight in Madrid.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 *Madrid: At Leisure*

Today is free to enjoy some independent exploration. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your day.

Overnight in Madrid.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 7 *Madrid - Toledo - Cordoba*

Today we travel by road to Cordoba via Toledo, a city with a unique blend of Arab, Jewish, Christian, Roman, and Visigothic elements. Toledo sits on a rocky promontory isolated on three sides by a looping gorge of the Tagus River. The history of several different cultures is contained within this region, represented by the houses, synagogues, churches, and mosques.

In Toledo we see the Cathedral and visit the Santa Maria la Blanca Synagogue, which shows the influence of the Granada Moors. It has an ornate ceiling and carved arabesques, not in Arabic, but in Hebrew. The most elaborate Mudejar interior in the city is hidden

behind the deceptively humble facade of this former synagogue, built in the 14th century by Samuel Ha-Levi, the Jewish treasurer to Pedro the Cruel. Adjoining the synagogue is an interesting museum dedicated to Jewish Sephardi culture. We also see one of Toledo's most outstanding attractions, El Greco's masterpiece, "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz," located inside the Church of Santo Tome.

After lunch in Toledo, we continue our road journey* to Cordoba, crossing the Despenaperros Mountains and the border pass between Castile and Andalucia, home of Federico Garcia Lorca, lover of Salvador Dali and one of Spain's most famous historical and literary figures.

* Depending on earlier Madrid sightseeing and train schedules, we may return to Madrid by road and travel to Cordoba by rail this afternoon (+/- 2 hours).

Overnight in Cordoba.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 *Cordoba: City Tour - Granada*

This morning we visit the magnificent and legendary city of Cordoba (a World Heritage City), where we observe the existence of multicultural and different religions. Our tour starts at the Roman Bridge and the Calahorra Tower, an Arab defensive tower. We continue to the Cathedral-Mosque, the only catholic cathedral built in the heart of a mosque. Next we arrive at the Alcazar a 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. Lunch and free time for shopping around the lively narrow streets of the Jewish Quarter.

Later today we travel to Granada by private bus.

Overnight in Granada.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 *Granada: The Alhambra*

Today we tour 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.

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 as well as the old Moorish quarter of the Albaicin.

For a small town, Granada offers a fair variety of bars and cafes that range from gay friendly to exclusively gay. It's easy to find everything from sunny sidewalk tables for people-watching over coffee to wild neon hotspots. Not overrun by tourists, bars and cafes in Granada are relatively cheap and easy to get into, even on a Friday night.

Overnight in Granada.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 *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 visit the Mondragon Palace, built in a Mudejar style. Ronda is 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.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 *Ronda - Pileta Caves - 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 (by road) the route known as "the route of the white villages" for the singularity of the scenery. Lunch and time to explore Grazalema, a white hill down nestled in Grazalema National Park. Prior to arrival in Sevilla (Seville), we stop at a viewpoint for a panoramic photo opportunity.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 12 *Sevilla: City Tour*

Sevilla, the fourth largest city in Spain, is the picture-perfect image of Andalucia, complete with restored Andalusian architecture, orange groves, flower-filled patios, and castanet-rattling Gypsies.

While in Sevilla we visit the largest cathedral in Spain, built in a Gothic style with lovely stained glass windows, choir, and chapels. We visit the Giralda Tower, with its spectacular views of the city. We will also see the Moorish Alcazar Palace, a 14th century palace, the oldest royal residence in Europe and still in use. King Juan Carlos resides here while in Sevilla, as King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella once did. We finish our tour with a walk through the Old Quarter.

Balance of the day at leisure. Sevilla, though small and sedate, actually has a vibrant gay scene, especially the area around the park along the Alameda de Hercules street, a popular hangout for having a beer and a chat. There is one bar after another and basically all the bars there are at least gay-friendly and the gay bars are straight-friendly, thus you'll usually find a mixed, easy-going crowd.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 *Depart*

Departure from Sevilla.

BUEN VIAJE!

Meal Plan: Breakfast