

Andalucia: A Historical Introduction

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The Andalusia of reality is even more remarkable than the romantic dream evoked by its name. It lives as the home of flamenco and fighting bulls, of sherry and olives. It is peopled by literary immortals such as the hot-blooded lover Don Juan and the sharp-witted barber Figaro. From the 19th century writers like Washington Irving, artists like David Roberts and other visitors from abroad celebrated an oriental fantasy of Islam in Spain. Their beguiling vision took life especially from those buildings that had outlived the end of Muslim Spain. The Great Mosque at Córdoba and the Alhambra at Granada are rightly placed among humanity's greatest architectural achievements. The presence of Islam in Andalusia for almost eight centuries has had a profound impact on the physical and material culture of its people. And yet there is much more to experience in a land that has known many of the greatest civilisations of the Mediterranean world. Andalusia's population absorbed the various newcomers whose monuments survived in the region's dramatic scenery. With its brilliant light, wild landscape and rich cultural heritage, the real Andalusia is more than able to drive out the dream image and feed the imagination of any traveller.

The region's name suggests the movement of peoples throughout the area. Nowadays, Andalusia is much smaller in area than the Muslim al-Andalus from which its name is taken. Al-Andalus, in turn, was fancifully named after the Vandals who crossed from Spain to North Africa in the 5th century AD. Modern Andalusia is lapped by the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, while to the north and east it is isolated by two mountain chains; the Sierra Morena and the Sierra Baetica. The western part of the region thrives by the banks of a great slow-moving river, the Guadalquivir which waters two ancient cities, Seville and Córdoba. To the east, at the foot of the snow-capped Sierra Nevada, lies a fertile plain dominated by the city of Granada. Around the Andalusian coast are historic port cities, such as Cadiz,

which have been centres of trade since biblical times. The region contains Mount Mulhacen, the highest mountain on the Spanish mainland, and also can claim to be the most southerly point of Europe. Andalucia now is one of the seventeen autonomous communities which make up Spain's government. It has a surface area of over 87,000 square kilometres (35,000 square miles) and a population of over 7 million people.

After the fall of the Visigothic kingdom in 711 at the hands of Arab and Berber invaders, Andalucia entered into a golden age of commerce and culture as part of a great Islamic empire which stretched across Africa to India and China. Under the Ummayad dynasty (756-1021), Andalucian cities, such as Córdoba, Seville and later, Granada, were centres of literature, science and the arts. Muslim skills in irrigation and new crops transformed the countryside. The region was celebrated for the quality of its leatherwork and silks. We shall see evidence for all of this but most impressive is the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the palace/garden complex of the Alhambra in Granada.

The balance of the long struggle with Islam in Spain finally tipped in favour of the Christian kingdoms in the 13th century after the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa opened up the Guadalquivir valley. By 1248 Seville had fallen. Of Islamic Spain, only the Nasrid kingdom of Granada survived. Protected by mountains and sustained by a flourishing economy, Granada held out until 1492 when the city surrendered to King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, the Reyes Catolicos. Granada, like elsewhere in Andalucia, now acquired a new style of architecture, with churches and palaces adding to the castles and watchtowers. Changing patterns of agriculture transformed the countryside.

The fateful decision to expel Jews and, later, Muslims in the 15th and 17th centuries did serious harm to Andalucia. While the opening up of the Americas brought massive prosperity to Seville and Cadiz, with their monopolies on precious metals and tobacco, elsewhere in the region there was widespread depopulation and banditry. The wealth of the New World supplied the patronage for great artists in Seville such as Francisco Zurbaran, Diego Velazquez and Bartolome Murillo. In the 17th and 18th centuries the arrival of gypsies with their distinctive flamenco music and, also, the formal development of bull-fighting profoundly affected Andalusian culture. Since the 19th century foreign artists and writers have rediscovered Andalucia's Islamic heritage. The modern region of Andalucia is vibrant and prosperous, with 21st century style taking its place among the treasures of a glorious past.

On this tour we shall experience the dramatic flow of Andalucian history through its extraordinary range of cities and monuments. In Seville, Córdoba, Jaén and Granada we shall see baths, mosques and palaces from all of the major Islamic periods. We shall also visit the Alcazar of Seville where the palaces reveal a remarkable Christian appetite for Muslim elegance. The dazzling pueblos blancos (white towns) offer highly picturesque reminders of their origins as frontier strongholds. In Ubeda and Baeza we can enjoy the elegant architecture of the Renaissance and after. Masterpieces of Spanish art and architecture are never far away. But there is more than ancient human culture and a lively present-day lifestyle. Above all, Andalucia's stunning empty landscape, with great landed estates where fighting bulls were bred and surreal patterns of olive growth bemuse the eye, with its soaring crags and sweeping coastline continues to seduce the imagination of any traveller.