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The iconic arches of the Mezquita also known as the Mosque-Cathedral



CORDOBA

My 48-hour inamorata

How much can one enamored traveler absorb of an enthralling place within the tight frame of just around two days? Is it even possible? We show you that it is.

Words by **Willy Marbella** Images by **Gabriel Dela Cruz**





Exotic. That is the one word that I feel best describes Cordoba. From Islamic arches to delightful patios, and a flamenco dancer pitting her terpsichorean skill with a horse, I was so impressed by these visual treats that the word “exotic” seemed to grow a new meaning for me. These are all just some of the delights that Cordoba has, where everything appears to be connected by narrow passages instead of boulevards and wide avenues. The intimate scale of the city has enamored me in less than 48 hours.

Cordoba’s history started with the Roman settlement, later taken over by the Visigoths, and eventually becoming a Caliphate and capital of a Muslim emirate. At a certain point, it was the largest city in Europe. “It took only seven years for the Moors to conquer Andalucia, but it took the Christians 800 years to get it back,” according to our guide from Cordoba, Laura, whose model-like looks become even more impressive with the fact that she is on her way to a Ph.D. “Or what we call the Reconquista or the reconquest of al Andalus, when the Christians under King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabel of Castille took back Granda, the last stronghold of the Moors in 1492.”

“But before all these, it was a peaceful co-existence between the Christians, the Moors and the Jews,” added Lola, our guide from Andalucia.



This page, clockwise from top left: outside the Mezquita; a shrine to Mary inside the mezquita; ruins of Medinat al-Zahara.



THE MEZQUITA

Clearly the jewel of Cordoba is the Mezquita. It was a Great Mosque ordered and built by Abd al-Rhaman. “It subsequently grew as other Muslim leaders added to it during the time of their rule, until the Christians were able to take it back from the Muslims during the re-conquest era and a Roman Catholic Church was built inside it,” Laura explained as we made our way inside the Mezquita from the side entrance.

Upon entering the Mezquita or the Mosque Cathedral, I could not contain my elation as I let out a little yelp. Lola was clearly amused that I was that happy. I literally felt like a kid in a candy store. I read in a travel guide that it was “a forest of columns,” and indeed, it was. But it was the stripped double arches and multi-lobe arches that really fascinated the interior designer in me. The repeating pattern was hypnotic. I was mesmerized by the breadth and depth of how many there were. Laura proceeded to tell us of the differences between the columns, what period they were done, where they were taken from, and the nuances of each one in

relation to the period when they were created. Then she gave special attention to the mirhab or the door that “pointed to Mecca.”

“This is the mirhab, or the semi-circular structure that should lead the faithful to the direction of Mecca. A guide, if you will, where to face during prayer. Unfortunately, they found out that it was facing the wrong direction,” Laura explained. Back home, I tried to dig a little deeper to the mystery. I found an online dissertation by David King explaining the mystery, but it is long and arduous. However, if only for the beauty and the magnificence of this golden structure, it was worthy of observation, inspection and scrutiny by its audience.

Also inside the Mezquita is a gigantic monstrance in gold and silver. I felt a little disconcerted of this essentially Christian relic seating in the middle of this very Moorish structure. It threw me off the loop but it essentially highlighted Cordoba’s role in the history of the battle between the two religions. To miss Cordoba during a visit to Andalucia is like missing half of the region.



This page, clockwise from top left: hallway inside the Mezquita; a Christian altar inside the Mezquita; the monstrance inside the Mezquita.



This page, clockwise from top left: details from Medinat al-Zahara; Triunfo de San Rafael; Puente Romano; scenes from the old town; dining in Cordoba; a Christian altar inside the Mezquita; the Mirhab that pointed the wrong way to Mecca. **Opposite page:** the Andalucian horse and the flamenco dancer.



THE ANDALUSIAN HORSE AND THE FLAMENCO

Andalusian horses are some of the most exceptional and elegant horses in the world. Their history goes as far back as 30,000 BCE as confirmed by the cave paintings all over Spain. King Philip II, who was a great lover of horses, established the Royal Stables of Cordoba precisely to propagate and promote the Andalusian horse, and it has persevered. So, after refreshing ourselves with all the history and beauty of the Mezquita, we set out to watch the elegance and grace these horses were known for.

As we entered the stables, I saw men in costumes, complete with berets decorated with ostrich feathers, walking the horses. Little did we know we were a tad late and Lola was trying her best to get us in ASAP. As we entered the venue, an elegantly dressed “cowboy” in a three-piece gray suite, complete with matching hat, shiny chaps and a very long stick, was doing his routine. With his horse, they covered the entire arena as the caballero had the horse strutting to the music. After his routine, in came the other caballero. His routine was a little more exhausting because he was at the back of the horse directing the horse what to do. He obviously had to rein him in because otherwise he can get dragged by the powerful animal. Again, they were strutting and prancing to the beat of the music. But the main event was at the very close, when a flamenco dancer came in, performed some dance moves, and all of a sudden the gate opened, and a caballero on horseback strutted in and began to dance around the flamenco dancer. Together with her manton de manila, she twirled, stamped and tapped to the music. She did braceo movements (elegant arm movements) with her maton as the caballero gingerly guided the horse within swiping distance to the dancer. It had to be precise because the timing of the music and the distance between horse and dancer tells the story of the dance. It was an interaction and corroboration in rhythm, elegance, grace and power – and this happens only in Cordoba.





Opposite pge, clockwise from top: patio houses in Cordoba; dining in the middle of flora; tapas to start the dining experience ham croquettes and berenjenas con miel (fried potatoes with honey). **This page:** more patio houses in Cordoba.

The performance was an interaction and corroboration in rhythm, elegance, grace and power – and this happens only in Cordoba.

THE PATIO HOUSES

Every May, the city of Cordoba comes alive with an explosion of colors. Geraniums, jasmines, tuberoses, carnations, roses, bougainvillea – name it, as long as it is flowering, it is there. However, most of these flowers are not on the street but in the courtyards in the houses of Cordoba. Laura, our beautiful guide who could have been a muse for this festival, was able to bring us around some of these houses that have kept the tradition alive even though it was still too early for the festival.

The first house she brought us to was a consistent winner. Against the backdrop of a white washed wall, identical pots were planted with geraniums of only pink and red. It was a sight to behold. If vertical gardens are the fad today, Cordoba was ahead of its time. Try to imagine four walls surrounding an open courtyard. You feel like Aphrodite being wooed by one of the gods and the way he shows it is by magically surrounding you with flowers. It was a delight to see such beauty. There was absolutely not one pot that was without a flower. But my absolute favorite was another house that had artisan and craftsmen as tenants and owners of the quarters inside. As we entered, there was a souvenir store, then inside was a shop of fans, another one sold leather goods, and another had art and other artisanal products that are traditional to Cordoba.

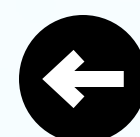
Right across the entrance in the middle, was a staircase that had greeneries cascading down the side of its rail-handle. Hanging from the eaves of the second floor were potted geraniums of different colors and varieties. At the balcony railing are more geraniums that are so lush they were cascading down and covering the entire balcony with blooms. Somewhere in the middle of all these are lush ferns, adding more fullness to the already thick flora. At the ground level, every inch of wall was covered by some kind of plant, all randomly chosen and whose only job was to cover anything that was white. It was so opportune that there was a man, working on some terra-cotta pots on a wooden bench and it was just magical. It felt like Van Gogh could not have composed it any better. This particular patio house brought two of my most loved things together – plants and art. “So where do I sign up to volunteer in this house?” I teased Laura.

And this is Cordoba. Its intimate nature made me feel like comparing it to a beloved aunt whom I always looked up to for comfort. There was familiarity, warmth and a shared history. It made me feel at home with an ardor that only a loved one can get across, all in two short days.

<http://cordobaturismo.es/en/>



The Alhambra as seen from Generalife



Granada:

From the tangible to the intangible. From beholding the physical beauty of the Alhambra, to being dazzled by a flamenco performance, one can have a total Andalusian experience in this Spanish destination.

Words by **Willy Marbella**

Images by **Gabriel Dela Cruz**





Clockwise from top left: door details in Alhambra; exterior walls of Alhambra; colonnades of Carlos V palace; gradens of Generalife

My education about Andalusia and the Moors of Spain came when I read about the beauty of the Alhambra. “Alhambra is the ‘Crown Jewel’ of Granada. In January 1492, King Boabdil of the Nasrid Dynasty surrendered the city of Granada and the Alhambra to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, ending the 800-year rule of the Moors in Spain. The reconquista was finally complete.” This was our guide Ana’s introduction about this World Heritage site.

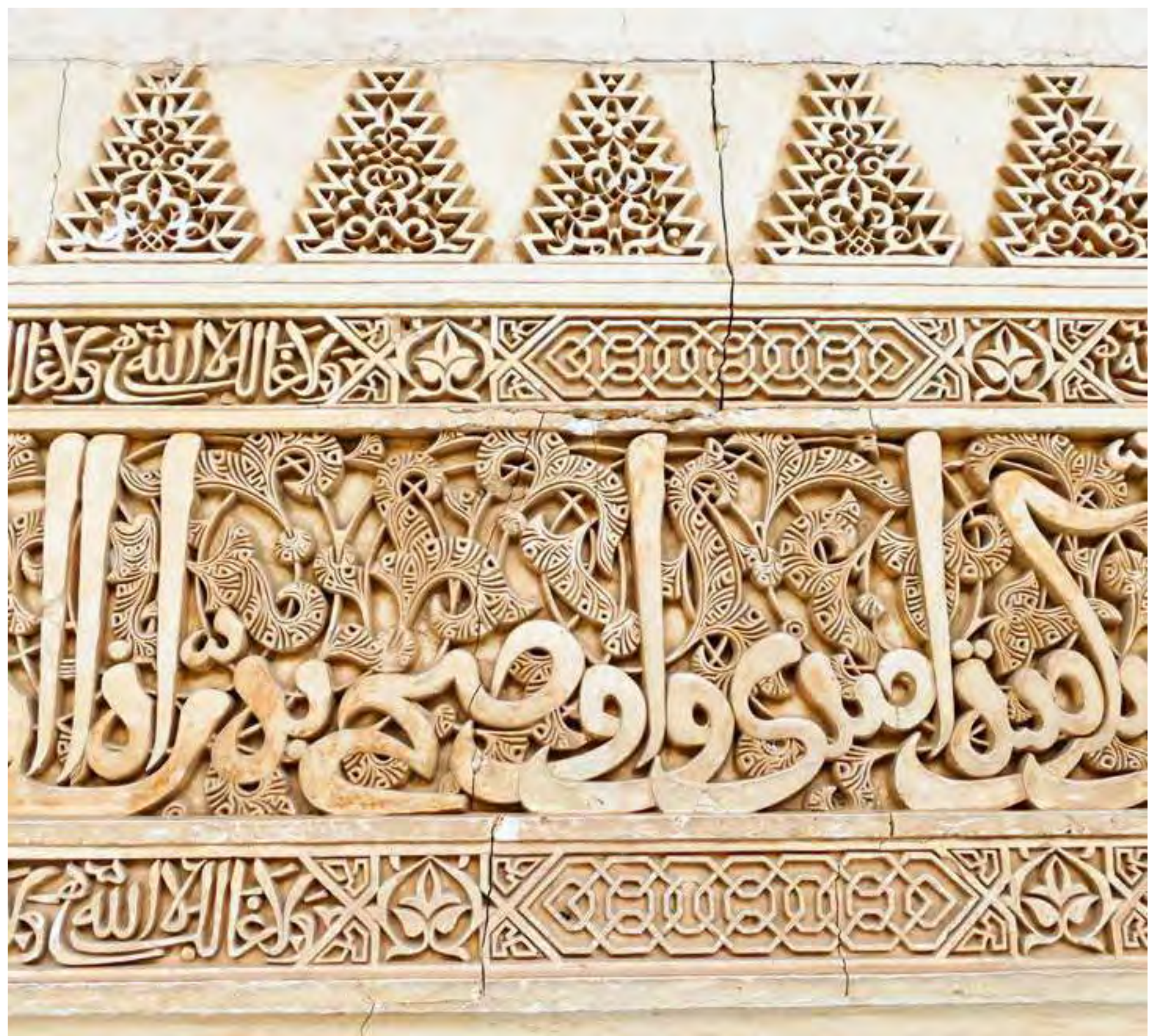
As we started to walk the grounds of the Alhambra, we entered through one of the towers and suddenly we were in the middle of Palacio de Carlos V.

It was a huge circular structure that had two floors surrounded by perfectly equidistant Doric columns. Sadly, despite its kept condition, it felt like an abandoned place. It was the only structure, in the whole complex that was Christian in design.

Leaving the palace, we made our way to the “real” entrance of the Alhambra. For those of you who are planning to visit this beautiful and historic site, please be mindful of the timed entrances. You cannot purchase a ticket and expect to walk in the grounds immediately after. So, to get the most of your visit, try to get the entrance tickets beforehand and make sure you are there a few minutes before your appointed

time. The Alhambra is so huge that will take half a day to do just the basic tour. Or one can spend an unlimited amount of time just to admire the beauty and detail of every part of this amazing citadel.

“We are about to enter the Nasrid Palaces of the Alhambra. The Alhambra is made up of two major areas, the three palaces and the garden called Generalife (pronounced “heneralifeh”). The three palaces are: the Comares Palace, the Palace of the Lions and the Partal Palace, all Moorish in design,” Ana said. “The Comares Palace is the official residence of the King where he receives guests and dignitaries, while the Palace of the Lions is the personal residence where the wives, harem and baths



Clockwise from top left: columns in Court of the Lions; written in the wall, “only Allah is victorious”; window details; one of the many courtyards of Alhambra.

are. The Partial Palace is the latest addition to the list.”

Once inside the palaces, I found it hard to easily absorb the many details Ana was discussing for each salon or room. The art and design were of overwhelming beauty that I had to surrender to its magic. It is no fault of Ana’s that half of what she said, and there were a lot of details, were lost on me despite having recorded much of it. The delicate lace trceries on the fascia, the geometric patterns made by the alicatado tiles, the ceilings that reminded me of beehives, stalactites, and stars of the galaxy, elegant arches and multi-lobed arches that connected the indoors to the outdoors, the quote “Only Allah is victorious,” on the walls – these are the details that will always remain with me. To say it was enchanting is an understatement. If ever you find yourself in Alhambra, I suggest you get a guide book because it will help you remember the immense beauty of the place.

After touring the palaces of the Alhambra, we crossed an open area and entered the gardens of Generalife. Moorish gardens are a great contrast to

western gardens because of its intimate scale. I felt connected to the plants because they were all within arms-reach. This is exactly how Generalife was. But the reward of the Generalife came at the very end. The last open garden looked directly across the Alhambra. To see the terra-cotta walls and roofs of the citadel create multilevel sections interspersed by foliage, coming from the flawless cone-shaped cypress trees, was as perfect a picture as one can get. It made the Alhambra look like a city that was rising and floating from the ground. The last treat is the exit. Coming out of a long covered concave walk with a roof of foliage felt like the garden gave me life. The Alhambra was an experience of a lifetime I had waited for.

THE ROYAL CHAPEL AND THE GRANADA CATHEDRAL

The tombs of Queen Isabel and King Philip were in the Royal Chapel of Granada, which is right next to the Granada Cathedral. “There are four cararra marble tombs here,” our guide Robert said. “These first two are of Queen Isabela and King Ferdinand who were able to make the

last Nasrid King of Moors surrender. The other two are of Joanna of Castile, who is their daughter, and her husband Philip I of Castile from the House of the Hapsburgs.”

He then proceeded to decode the coat of arms indicating the symbols that represented each house. “Take a look at these marble tombs, there are certain details of the delicate parts that obviously did not survive the journey.” He showed us shields that were missing, swords that were broken, and other little details that a regular tourist will miss entirely.

“Notice [that] the pillow of Queen Isabella is lower than that of King Ferdinand – this is supposed to indicate that King Ferdinand was wiser than Queen Isabella,” he pointed out. “Underneath are five sarcophaguses, the fifth is that of Miguel dela Paz from Portugal.” After descending the narrow staircase, we took a peak at the five caskets arranged underneath the marble tombs. It is unfortunate that picture taking is not allowed in this Royal Chapel. Also, it was a little difficult to get a peak of the top portion of the marble tombs because they were a little too high for people of regular height.

Having contented ourselves with the understated elegance of the Royal Chapel, we proceeded to the Cathedral which was just next door. The Royal Cathedral of Granada is an elegant Gothic building with a very Spanish flavor. “This was originally a mosque during the Nasrid era and later a church was built on top of it. It took more than a century to build mainly because of financial reasons,” Robert explained.

Inside the cathedral, one will behold a beautiful white construction with elegant relief detailing on the vaulted ceilings, also with two piped organs facing each other in the central nave. “These are Spanish piped organs because you will see they have vertical pipes that jut out from the middle,” out guide added. Indeed, there were, although the Baroque details really made it more elegant and opulent. It was also very



Clockwise from top left: grand cupola of Catedral de Granada; unique spanish pipe organ with vertical pipes; one of the altars inside the cathedral; side entrance to the cathedral. **Opposite page:** Flamenco dancing in Albaicin.

opportune for us to hear the acoustics in light of preparations for Semana Santa the following week, and a practice session was also being conducted by the church orchestra and choir. That was an unexpected bonus for us.

SACRAMONTE CAVES AND THE ALBAICIN

If there are a couple more things that Granada is specially known for, it will have to be the flamenco and the Albaicin. Unfortunately, the night started out for us with a drizzle, as our minibus made its way into the hilly town of Albaicin. The streets were narrow, there were no sidewalks, it was pure cobblestone all over, pedestrians and vehicles had to give way to each other during tight turns with only their headlights as their beacon, and the cold breeze was no comfort to any of us. After a few minutes of navigating these passageways and missing the lighted Alhambra because the drizzle has gotten stronger, we were let out from the minibus and walked a very short distance to a restaurant. As we made our way in, we suddenly realized we were inside a cave. It looked like it was carved inside a rock in a concave manner, in a simple straight line with no windows, and in the middle is a piece of wood that was tacked to the floor.

In a couple of minutes, women and men in distinctly flamenco attire poured in. We were about to witness an Intangible Cultural Heritage. Then it started. The clapping began and in a raspy, almost off-tuned voice, a man without a guitar started singing. While all this was happening, they all started stomping their feet on the wood floor creating the rhythm of the music. A few minutes later, one of the four ladies stood up and proceeded to strut the flamenco. It was a combination of fast and slow music, while hand movements and feet stomping caught the attention of everyone in the audience. My favorite part was when the eldest member of the group stood up and all of a sudden, the sound of castanets started to fill the cave. It was pure Andalusian sensation. For twenty minutes, she was making the castanets sing. After the castanets, she suddenly produced a Manton de Manila, and was twirling and looping and curling it around the dance floor and on herself. The manton looked like it was dancing by itself.

Despite the heavy rains that accompanied our way back to the hotel, everyone was in high spirits. It was the perfect ending to this introduction to Granada, the last stronghold of the Moors, and now a living bastion of what it is to be Andalusian.

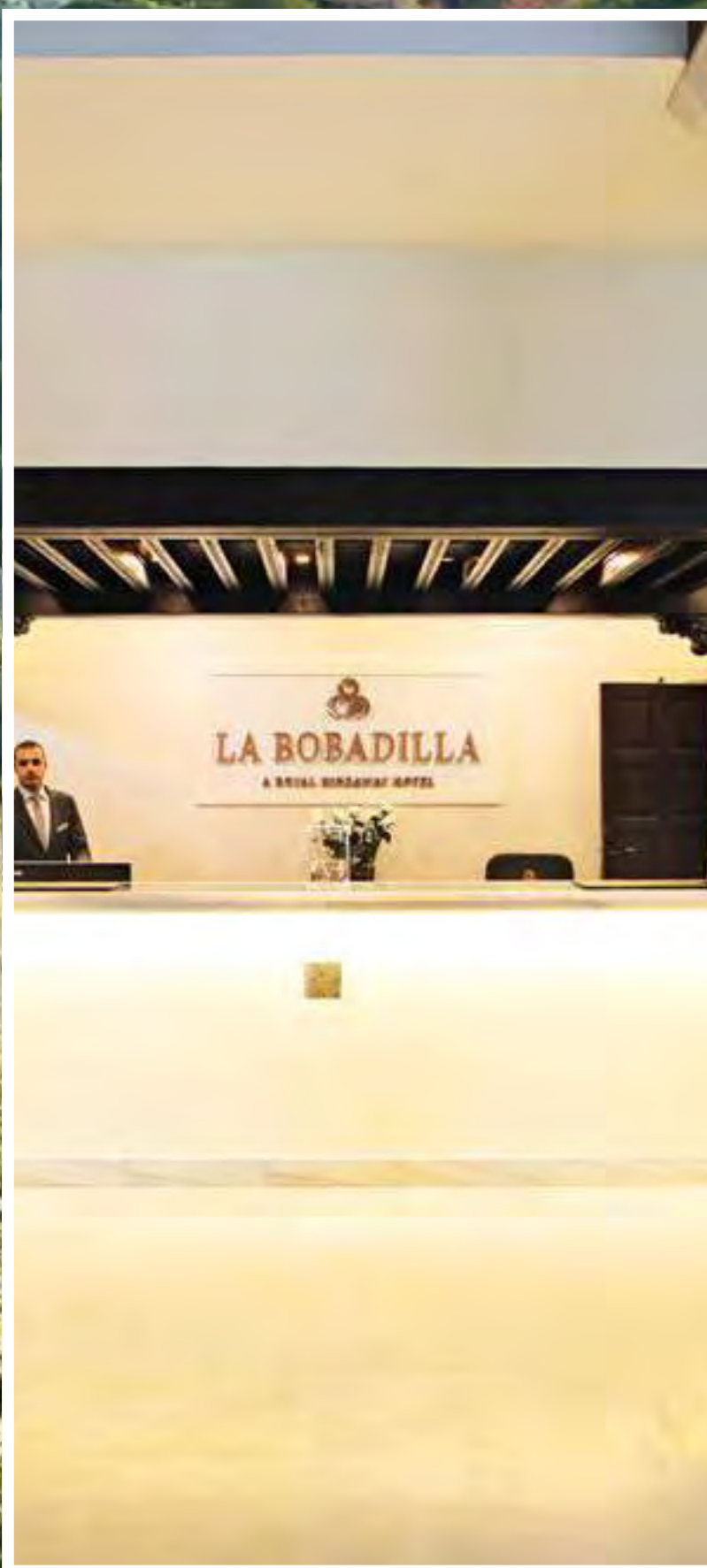
<http://en.granadatur.com/>



The Lovely La Bobadilla

La Bobadilla hotel is a luxury hotel of only 70 rooms, made unique by its own chapel and pipe organ. It started out as a farm house which was later bought by Dr. Egli when he was looking to put up a “luxury restaurant that respected its surroundings and was designed in style that reflected Andalusia’s unique cultural mix.”

As the project grew, so did the vision. From the 350 hectares olive plantation, it has doubled in size through acquisitions, and so too with the amenities. It now has three outdoor swimming pools: one with heated water, one for children, and one with regular temperature water; and another one indoor. There are four restaurants: La Finca which serves gourmet and international cuisine; El Cortijo which serves regional cuisine; El Mirador which overlooks the pool; and La Bobadilla where breakfast is served. There are spa and gym facilities. There is also La Plaza, a glass paneled function room that



can accommodate a variety of activities, and Bar el Cortijo which features purely guitar music for the night owls to savor with their drinks.

The charm of La Bobadilla is that it has kept its warm, Andalusian atmosphere while reminding its guests of its farmhouse origin. White walls and tiled roofs with an abundance of flora lend a homey ambience. A fountain, very Andalusian, greets guests and visitors at the entrance. In the lobby, double arches inspired by the Mezquita, look grand yet cozy. Pieces from the farm become art works as they are used as accents along the corridors.

My room was very generous. It had a foyer that led to the main bed area. In front of it is an enclosed sitting room with its own TV. There was another TV in front of the bed, and another sitting area to the right of the bed. A door led to a patio with a set of chairs and fantastic view of the church

tower, part of the tiled-roof of the main building and the generous grounds. It is a perfect spot for morning coffee.

Celebrities such as the Queen of Pop Madonna and former United States First Lady Michele Obama have been guests in this hotel. Privacy is of utmost importance to guests of these stature, and La Bobadilla delivers. The original farm house was preserved for posterity and is now El Mirador, one of the restaurants in the hotel. The fire palace is still a focal point, and one can see and hear the cracking of firewood as a pot of stew is brought to a boil while warmth radiates from it. The big windows have been preserved in its original size, with hardly any replacement. It is easily accessed by those coming from the outdoor swimming pool.

La Bobadilla looks and feels like a dream as one approaches it from the access road. And once inside, the dream becomes a beautiful reality.







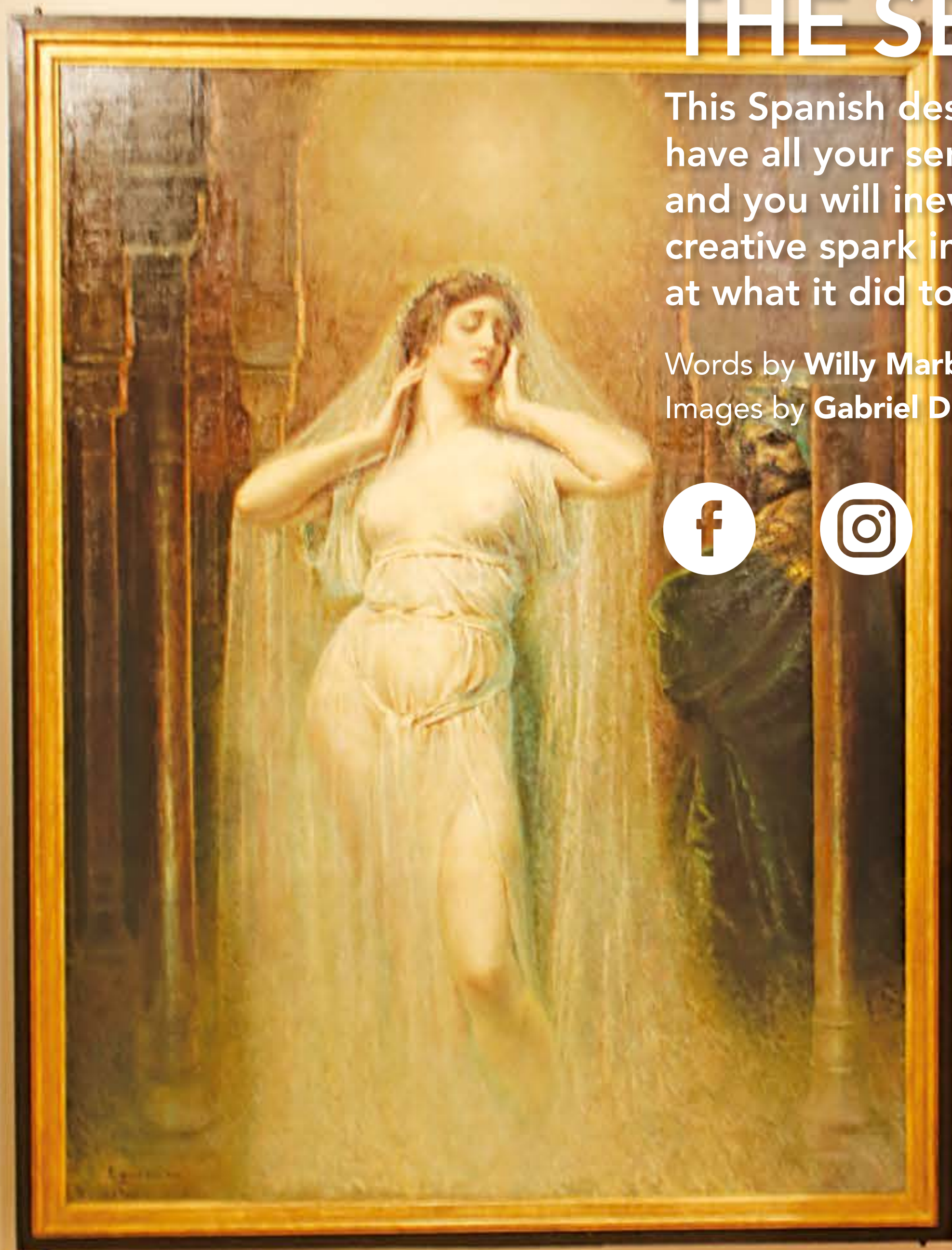
Malaga

A CITY FOR THE SENSES

This Spanish destination will have all your senses stirred, and you will inevitably find that creative spark in you – just look at what it did to Picasso.

Words by **Willy Marbella**

Images by **Gabriel Dela Cruz**





Malaga's reputation is built around the most famous and influential artist of the 20th century – Picasso. But little did we know that all other four senses were going to be engaged in our visit to this coastal city of Andalucia.

MERCADO CENTRAL DE ATARAZANAS

Our first stop in Malaga was to tease our sense of taste. Upon meeting Javier, our guide for this gastronomic journey, we went to a deli shop whose displays are rolls of the famous cod fish Spain is normally associated with – the bacalao. The fish looked like rolls of paper stacked on top of each other as Javier explained how in the olden times, salt was the main ingredient in preserving the fish and how it has persisted to today. Moving on, we came upon this huge enclosure with a distinctive Moorish horse-shoe shaped entrance. The rest was a modern building with metal louvres sidings and more Moorish arches for accent. “This is the Mercado Central de Atarazanas,” Javier said. “Atarazanas means shipyard. This used to be a shipyard because the banks of the ocean use to reach up to its front.”

A beautiful stained-glass mural can be seen even from outside. They were images that told the history of the building. Walking inside, Javier explained, “There are three major areas, the meat, fish, and the fruits and vegetable sections. Unfortunately, it's Monday today and there was no fishing Sunday, so the fish section is closed.”

We had traditional appetizers of, pescado frito or sardines in flour, and sliced aubergine or berenjenas con miel, both deep fried with batter. I was leaning more towards the aubergine because the trace of salt added a twist to its flavor. “We don't add salt

to the fish because we try to preserve the freshness of the fish,” Lola, from the Andalusian Tourism Board, informed us. We all downed these appetizers with a refreshing drink of what I remember as Tinto de Verano, red wine with triple sec giving it a sweet flavor. Inside, it was the cheese section that got me drooling. Javier was a wealth of information as we walked about every aisle and once we reached the fruits and vegetable section, I carted out a container trail mix and nuts, while our publisher ended up with a container of olive with a slightly bitter taste. If only for the abundance of colors and textures, Mercado Central is truly a unique Malaga experience.

Outside the mercado, we walked to a nearby corner deli where we were served all-jamon tapas. “There are three kinds of ham. The difference is what they are fed. The premier hams are known as Hamon Iberico. These are black hogs that are fed purely with acorns. You want to look for those with black hooves. At the opposite end are the Hamon Serrano, where the hogs are fed with cereal. They are available everywhere in Spain. Then you have the ones that are fed a combination of cereal and acorns,” Javier told us. However, yet again, it was the cheese section that caught my eyes. With his help, I ended up taking home a type of Manchego and blue cheese. I was in heaven.

Moving to the next restaurant, Javier said, “Russian salads, is very popular here that there is even a competition for it. This restaurant won last year’s competition!” What a privilege for us. The cool temperature of the salad was perfect as the sun hit the sidewalk where our table was located.

PICASSO

After all these food tasting, we now go the real visual stimulus, art. First off was the Picasso Museum. Our guide Maria was able to demystify the style and the lover Picasso had when he painted certain pieces. It was fun for me because the names are familiar and now I got to match the name of Picasso’s lover with the style. However, the ultimate Picasso, “Guernica”, is in the Prado while the seminal “Les Demoiselle des Avignon”, remains at the MoMa of New York. Nevertheless, it was still a thrill to be surrounded by the vision and genius of the 20th century’s most celebrated artist.

From the Museum, we crossed the Plaza de la Merced, saw “Picasso” seated



Opposite page, counterclockwise from top: bacalao on display; cafe outside Catedral de Malaga; deli choices in Mercado Central de Atarazanas; olives anyone?; slicing jamon iberico. **This page, clockwise from top left:** lining up for the Picasso Museum; memorabilia exhibit in the Picasso Museum; a painting by Picasso’s father.



This page: images from the Alcazaba. **Opposite page:** the Arab Bath of el Hammam in Malaga.

on a park bench, had a few selfies with him and went straight to Fundacion Picasso, the house where he was born. It was a two-storey affair that had hallways connecting different areas of the house. I could almost see the young Picasso, precocious, mischievous and animated as he ran around the house, sketch pad in hand, scattering the many drawings from his imagination. It is a contrast to the very-academic works of his father that were on display, who taught art as well in the local school.

EL HAMMAM

The Hammam (Arab bath) we visited engaged our sense of touch and smell. Located on a busy street, the sense of calmness starts right at the reception where a section for drinking tea calmly was set up; apparently, this was the last section before leaving the baths. Inside, we were guided to the changing section, then it was quite a long walk to the first section, the shower. We had to choose the oil scent that we would like for our massages. Very elegantly presented in a hallway, there were four beautiful boxes, all with delicate lattice work and we had to smell the aroma that came from each of these boxes. I ended up with lavender and our publisher with rose. Despite it being only a 30-minute massage, the therapist still managed to put me to sleep.

After the massage, we made our way down to the baths to choose which water temperature we wanted to soak into. The medium temperature was the biggest section and was under a skylight. Draped all around it is thin cheese cloth that separated the soaking area from the corridors around it. Behind it is the cold water section. I chose the area with the hottest temperature, and yet it was comfortable to the skin. This section was a darker, enclosed section, and better for calming the body. As I laid in the water, I could see star-shaped cutouts on the dome that mimicked the hammams of the past. There were two more sections attached to it – the hot stone, where one can stay on a massive heated stone; and the steam room. To lie down in a darkened room in warm water with candlelight brought down anxieties I had for the day.

THE ALCAZABA AND THE MALAGA CATHEDRAL

Despite having already seen the Alhambra, the Alcazaba of Malaga was still a thrill to behold. A terra cotta fortress in the middle of the city, it is said this Alcazaba is one



of the best preserved. We took an elevator to get to the entrance. I was once again transfixed by the beauty and intricacies of this Moorish citadel. It definitely does not compete with the size of the Alhambra. But the multi-lobed arches, the alicatado tiles, ceilings of geometric designs, the double walls that provided extra fortification, and walkway for the guards of the past still made this Alcazaba a jewel on its own. What made it even more charming is the Roman amphitheater attached outside and still used to this day.

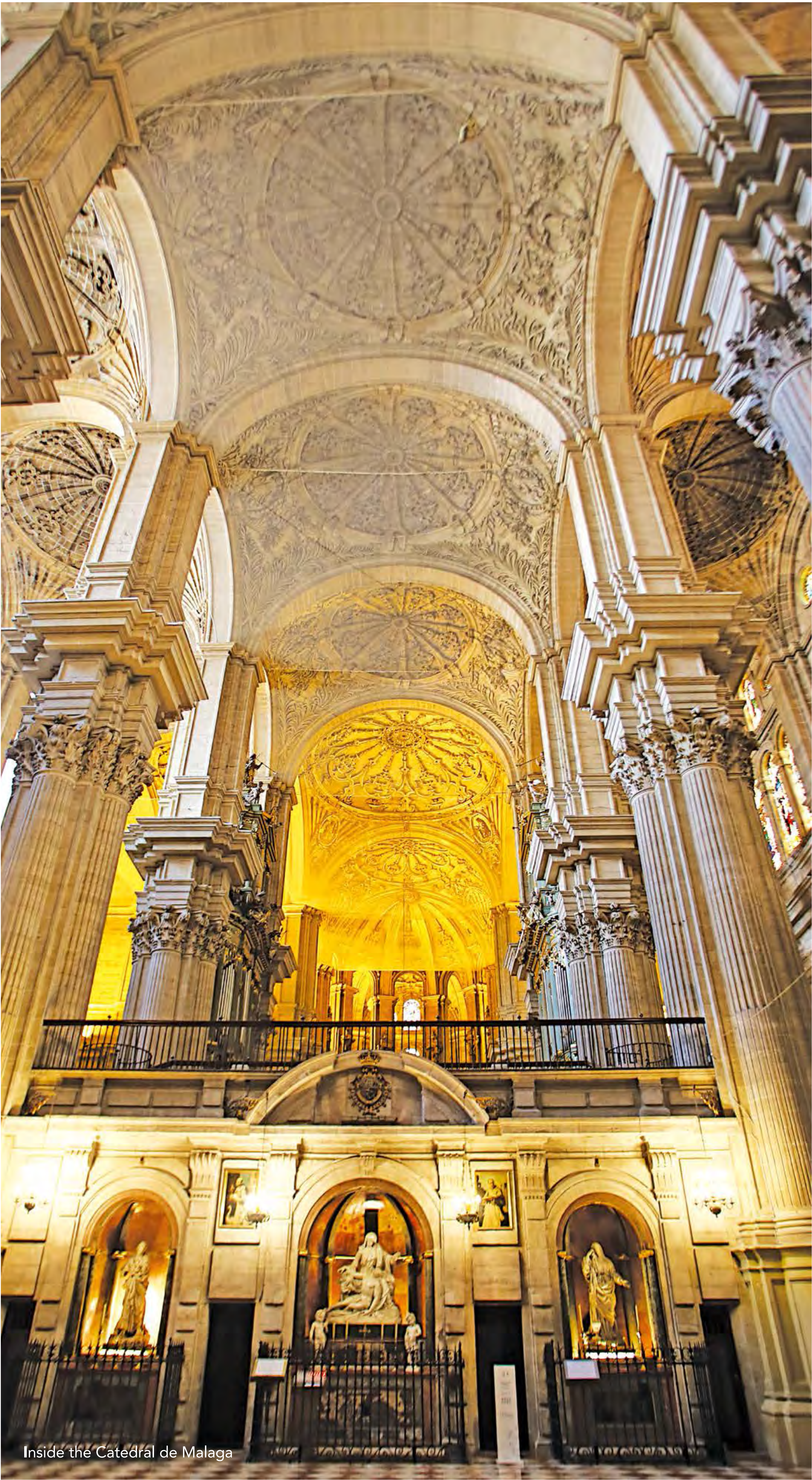
“This is ‘La Manquita’ or the ‘One-armed Lady’ as Catedral de Malaga is lovingly called. Built in the 18th century, because of financial issues, the most memorable feature of this cathedral is the tower that was never finished,” Santiago, our guide, explained. To this day she remained in the same state and has even earned that “endearing” moniker. But despite this lack of limb, it is still considered one of the best cathedrals in Spain. Inside, what is most interesting is the choir section. Just like other Andalusian cathedrals, the choir area is at ground level instead of a raised balcony. Each chair of the choir member has a small piece of wood at the edge of the seat. When a choir member is standing up while singing and feels tired, the piece of wood on the folded chair can be a “mini-chair” as he can “sit” on the wood, giving him the illusion of standing when actually he is just being propped up.

Aside from this ingenious invention, the more than 40 carvings of the different saints and the symbols that accompany them in the entire choir area, are simply astonishing. An example is St. Joseph, patron saint of house hunters. Carved next to his figure is small house. This is attention to details give this section its esteemed reputation. At night, I was blessed with an astonishing view of the cathedral from my hotel bedroom. Lit from below, it was a cathedral in pure splendor. It reminded me of the Parthenon in Greece, looking like a grand beacon for the entire city.

<http://www.malagaturismo.com/en>



This page: the many beautiful altars of La Manquita or the Catedral de Malaga.

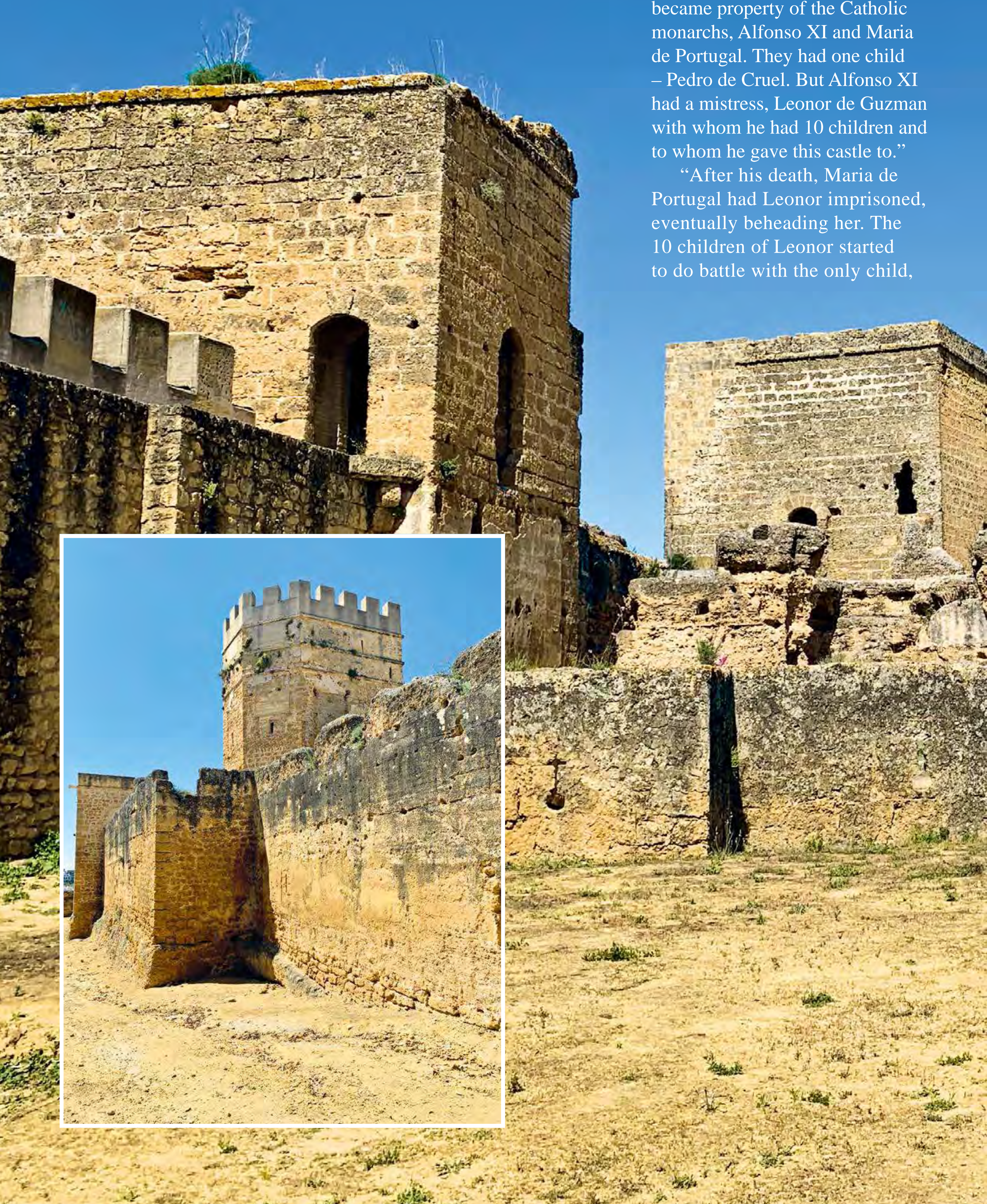


Inside the Catedral de Malaga

Alcala

The castle in the town of Alcala was a military castle with the most interesting and amusing story. Our local guide Lucia explained, “When the Catholics regained Spain, this military castle became property of the Catholic monarchs, Alfonso XI and Maria de Portugal. They had one child – Pedro de Cruel. But Alfonso XI had a mistress, Leonor de Guzman with whom he had 10 children and to whom he gave this castle to.”

“After his death, Maria de Portugal had Leonor imprisoned, eventually beheading her. The 10 children of Leonor started to do battle with the only child,



Pedro the Cruel. But Pedro the Cruel was a very good warrior and defeated all nine siblings. However, he was to meet his match with the last sibling, Enrique II. At the end, the last illegitimate son of Alfonso XI, killed Pedro the Cruel giving the house of Leonor de Guzman the final victory,” she said. After a bemused giggle, I thought, “Wait ‘til Netflix gets a hold of this story.”

From the castle, we made our way to the Oromana Hotel, and had what arguably was one of the best meals we had in Andalucia. We started off with their traditional salmonejo, a traditional tomato soup with biscuits and some cherry. Their oxtail croquette with béchamel sauce was really creamy; the shrimp

in their Russian salad added a layer of refreshing flavor, and even their flat bread was a perfect accompaniment for all these tapas. The main course of Corvina fish, or trout, was perfectly tender and really flavorful. To end the meal was torrijas, a traditional dessert in Andalucia served only during Holy Week. They made an exception and made it for us a week earlier. It is a mix of rice pudding and brioche, and will delight those with a sweet tooth.

<http://www.andalucia.org/en/contact-us/jaen/alcala-la-real/>





Marbella

It was quite amusing I was visiting a town that was my namesake. Even as young man, I was aware that the town of Marbella was where the European royalties and “perfumed crowd” went because of its constant sunny climate. It is home to the famous Porta Banus where Club Mediterranee, or Club Med for short, has its headquarters.

Words by **Willy Marbella**

Images by **Gabriel Dela Cruz**



The famous Porta Banus marina in Marbella

Gabriella, our local guide, said, “Porta Banus was named after Jose Banus, the property developer who envisioned a marina of luxury yachts and cars.” Indeed, our eyes were treated to the jaw-dropping yachts and cars that are not seen on a regular basis on the road. “Look, Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Mercedes Benzes, Bentleys they are all parked one after another. Look at the yachts,” she pointed out to us. Even with my untrained eyes, the yachts were monstrous in size and were of premium standards, a far cry from the dinghy I was practicing on when I was trying my hand at sailing. Luxury brands litter the shops, much like Rodeo Drive. It was indeed indulgent, extravagant and an unabashed exhibition of wealth. Porta Banus definitely has European luxury written all over it.

Approximately 8 kilometers away is the old town of Marbella, where there are still the narrow alley ways of the Historical Center or the Casco Antiguo. As we were walking the alleyways, Gabriella continued, “It is also the fisherman’s village where most of the fishermen lived because of its proximity to the sea. Nowadays, because of its inherent charm, people, not necessarily fishermen, live here. Every July, the fishermen of Marbella take the image of Our Lady of Carmen out on a procession in the sea.”

It was so heartwarming to know that tradition still has a place in the heart for the people of this town. As proof, we actually witnessed a mock procession of school children as they were guided by their teachers while carrying a miniature version of a carroza mounted on their shoulders. A hand-held bell was rung when they needed to stop, and rung again when they needed to proceed.

Another staple that we were able to experience in this quaint town were the churros con chocolate. Their churros interestingly looked like snakes asleep. It was all wound up, no ridges, unlike the ones I was used to seeing back home in Manila, and is a simple puff pastry dunked in a cup of gooey chocolate. It was pure joy.

<http://turismo.marbella.es/en/>



Top to bottom: a ceramic seat in their paseo; the altar in their catedral. **Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** outside the roman wall; a store of Jamon Iberico; an open restaurant in this sea side town; the marina; public art along the coastline, beach cabanas on the shoreline.

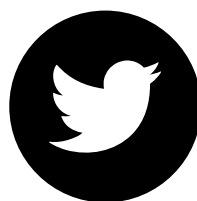
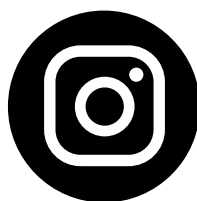


I was transfixed by the beauty and intricacies of this Moorish citadel.



Jerez

When the triumphal march of Aida opera played, 16 horses came in strutting calmly. Two lines of eight horses did formations that intersected, crossed, looped, joined and parted from each other maintaining gait, distance and phase, all in unison. I was reminded of a school of fish moving in unison, or Esther Williams as she made beautiful formations with other swimmers in the pool. Only this time, they were horses. This was Fundacion Real Escuela Andaluza del arte Ecuestre. A school exclusively meant to train equestrians for dressage. There was no jumping, no clock to beat.



Counterclockwise from top: Grounds of Fundacion Real Escuela Andaluz del arte Ecuestre; Facade Catedral de Jerez; a horse drawn carriage representing the different people of Jerez. **Opposite page, bottom right:** the inside arena for the equestrian show





The school teaches two styles of riding: the classic, and the vaquero or country side – akin to the Western style. They also have five courses, namely: grooming, tack- and saddle-making, carriage driving, dressage, and vet assistance. It was such a privilege to seat front and center, just a tad lower than the presidential box, to watch as these formations from a perfect vista, and to be given a tour of the “back the house” where we saw how the horses were prepared, the saddle room and the different kinds of saddles, the accessories used on the horses, again giving us a chance to be up close with these magnificent creatures.

After the equestrian show, we were treated to a product Jerez is known for – sherry. Tio Pepe is one of the best-known sherry producers of Jerez. Named after the uncle of the owner, we toured

the many different sections that showed the different stages in the production of sherry.

There are seven kinds, levels, if you will, of sherry’s taste and alcohol content: from the “fino” or the driest, to “dulce” or sweet sherry. The fino has the lightest color, like a pale white wine, to the richest red for the “dulce.” The most interesting thing about sherry production is the barrels. The barrels have been with them since the start of the company that they even have a “hospital” for them. These barrels are a big factor in the taste of the final product. From the tour, we had sherry tasting as the finale, and I have to say, for someone like me whose tolerance for alcohol is rather low, I liked the taste. The alcohol was perfectly tempered by a sweet flavor, very agreeable with my palate.

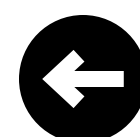
<https://www.andalucia.org/en/contact-us/cadiz/jerez-de-la-frontera/>



Left to right: old bottles in Tio Pepe; wall of Fontera de Jerez. **Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** all-male flamenco ensemble; a major square; facade of Fontera de Jerez.







Ronda

This is the birth place of the bullfighting ring. But bullfighting itself traces its origins to the Roman empire where it was part of the gladiator games. After getting introduced to Isabelle, our local tour guide, we crossed the street from our hotel, and she pointed to a structure, saying, “This is the first bullfighting ring in Spain.” It is clearly a source of pride for the people of Ronda.

Words by **Willy Marbella**

Images by **Gabriel Dela Cruz**





The dramatic cliffs of Ronda



As we walked the perimeter of the ring, we chanced upon two busts that are giants in the literature arena – Orson Wells and Earnest Hemingway. “These two writers stayed in Ronda during their lives,” our guide said. The former was eternally fascinated with bullfighting, and the latter wrote a nonfiction book, “Death in the Afternoon”, which further cemented bullfighting in the consciousness of the reading public.

Ronda has two distinct towns – the old town founded by the Moors during the 1st century, and the new town which was established in the 15th century. “Its iconic landmark is a dramatic bridge Puente Nuevo. It is 120 meters deep and connects the old town and the new town, separated by the El Tajo gorge. The vantage point from the old town is certainly more dramatic and panoramic than from the new town,” out guide explained. The breathtaking cliffs, seen from most of the viewing points of the city, mesmerized me. In the art world, it is said that nature is the ultimate artist. Who ever said this must have been looking the cliffs of Ronda. It puts into perspective the role that nature plays for man.

Another treasure that we were privileged to see was the Don Bosco House, owned by Don Francisco Granadino Pérez and his wife Doña Dolores Gómez Martínez who had no children. It was said to have been donated by Doña Dolores Gómez Martínez to the Salesian Congregation after she died. Details like the alicatado tiles, the tooled leather chairs, the carved furniture, the art nouveau grills, and a dramatic garden overlooking the valley spoke of a bygone era when life was a little bit more genteel.

<http://www.turismoderonda.es/en/>

This page: outside the first bullfighting ring. **Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** flamenco guitar mini-concert; altar in Catedral de Ronda; cliffs of Ronda; Puente Nuevo bridge connecting El Tajo gorge; dining in Ronda; statue of a venerated nun.





Seville

The star of Andalusia

The grandeur of art and culture shone all the more before the asianTraveler team in this captivating journey through one of Spain's largest cities.

Words by **Willy Marbella**

Images by **Gabriel Dela Cruz**



Plaza de Espana, this is what defines Seville





This page: images in Plaza de Espana

One will never be prepared with the beauty that Seville offers. It is like a music box encrusted with semi-precious stones that beguiles one’s eyes. Once opened, a diamond ballerina springs out, and gold, diamonds, pearls, rubies and sapphires start overflowing from its chamber. What your hand can hold is too limited compared to the jewels that Seville has in its chambers.

PLAZA DE ESPANA Y TRIANA

Plaza de Espana was our first destination. Getting there, it stunned both me and our publisher. I was just too dumbfounded by the beauty that I was beholding and Teresa, our local guide, quipped, “I can see you can hear but cannot understand anything I am saying,” and I did not deny it. It may not have been the pyramids of Giza, but Plaza Espana could have very well been it. Semi-circular in formation, it has three towers, two at the ends and one in the center. It is predominantly terra-cotta accented with beautifully painted tiles and balustrades, and wrought iron lamps. Double Romanesque columns run the entire length of the structure designed by Anibal Gonzales. It fuses Renaissance and neo-Moorish architecture in Regional Revival Style.

Making our way into the embrace of the square, Teresa was wise to stop talking and let me absorb the beauty that I was trying to commit to memory since I forgot my cellphone in the car, for note-taking and snapping pics. I was just intent in absorbing the grandness and the beauty of the place. Arabesque patterns on the azulejos (painted tiles), contrasting with the earthy terra-cotta structure, horse-drawn carriages with gold trim, and the fountain at the center, just made the place more enchanting.

Next stop was Triana, the town across the Guadalquivir River that produced these beautifully painted ceramic tiles. Triana is filled with ceramic shops, a great place to haunt for souvenirs. I was looking for something out of the ordinary and I eventually found the head of Carmen (from Bizet’s opera). Unfortunately, it was not for sale.



ROYAL ALCAZAR OF SEVILLE

First in the agenda the following day was the Royal Alcazar of Seville. It is the oldest Royal Palace in Europe still in use. It has two parts; first is the garden. It wasn't massive by European standards like the Versailles or the Belvedere; it was more intimate and more human in scale. Also called Jardin Alcazares, it has three unique main features. First is the maze. With very tall hedges, Teresa, the guide, challenged us, "Would you go in there?" "No," was our quick response. Then she added, "If I can do it, I'm sure you can." Thanks, Teresa, but no thanks.

The second attraction was the water organ. Completely hidden against a water feature, it is run by water and will play at timed intervals. It started playing when we got to it. I peaked through one of the ventilation holes and indeed, the organ was playing itself as water cascaded through its system. The whole melody lasted for five minutes.

The juiciest one is the Banos de Dona Maria de Padilla. It was where Peter the Cruel met his mistress Lady Maria de Padilla. It's catacomb-like ambiance can be quite sexy.

At the front of the garden is the actual palace. Standing in the middle of Patio de la Monteria, Teresa pointed out, "In this area, we have three palaces. To the left is the Palacio de la Contractacion, where Ferdinand and Isabelle signed the agreement with Columbus when he discovered the



Clockwise from top left: a lagoon in the Royal Alcazar de Seville; inside the Baños de Dona Maria de Padilla; courtyard of Palacio de Mudejar

Americas. In front is the Palacio Mudejar; it is one of the finest sample of mudejar style-Muslim workers working on Christian buildings. Peter the Cruel, a great admirer of the Alhambra, had it constructed. And the last one to the right is the Palacio Gotico."

As we entered through Palacio Gotico, we encountered an azulejo wainscoting with the intricate arabesque patterns prevalent all throughout Andalucia. The top portion was a bare white gothic vaulted wall and ceiling highlighted only by wood trim and inverted ceramic finials. Pendant lights added to its elegance. As we turned the corner, we get to Palacio Mudejar.

Despite having toured the Alhambra, the Palacio Mudejar

still took our breath away. The celebrated Virgin's Courtyard was a sight to behold. The enclosure had a fascia of multi-lobed arches decorated by lace-like patterns held up by double pillars. Above it was another set of living quarters with a cat walk accented by another set of pillars and arches with more delicate decorations. The terra cotta finish made the whole courtyard look as if the structure rose from the earth. The insides of the palace was nothing short of astonishing. Arabesque patterns, murquana vaults, a dome of multi-pointed star, it was all dream-like. Despite it being smaller than the Alhambra, Palacio Mudejar certainly was not taking a back seat when it came





Seville is like
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Opposite page: the crypt of Columbus, where each of the four pallbearer represents one of the four kingdoms of the old Spain. **This page, clockwise from top left:** the Catedral de Sevilla from the side; the majestic altar; Carlos V pavillion in the middle of the gardens.

to overwhelming the senses. Now that we have seen the richness and vibrancy of Mudejar architecture, we moved a through a few phases and entered the Christian world.

CATEDRAL DE SEVILLE AND LA GIRALDA

Entering from the side, we were suddenly engulfed by this cavernous structure. Its scale made me feel insignificant. “This is the third largest church in the world. The first one being St. Peter’s Basilica, and since that is a basilica and not a church, it therefore does not count, making this the second largest church in the world,” was the glib argument of our guide Teresa. Uncontested however, is its reputation as the biggest Gothic church in the world.

Since there was so much to be seen, let me just concentrate on the more significant ones. First is the altar piece or the retablo mayor. Measuring 98 feet high by 66 feet wide, it was Gothic art in pure splendor. I was shaking my head in disbelief when I saw it. It looked like a big slab of gold that had miniature carvings. Then there was the pipe organ. If the height of the main altar is any indication of the church’s height, then we can assume on the length of the pipes of this organ too. But the wood details that held the metal pipes together were the ones that caught my attention.

Intricate bas relief formed a rich texture contrasting with the pipes that were smooth and metallic. It rendered other pipe organs I have seen feeble.

And the last piece that needs to be pointed out was the tomb of Christopher Columbus. According to Teresa, “There is an issue whether the bones inside are of Cristopher Columbus or not. But of all those have the same claim, it is only Seville who allowed for DNA testing on the bones. And lo and behold, the experts have agreed they are of the great explorer.”

La Giralda, the bell tower that used to be a minaret, was at the side of the cathedral. And just like the cathedral it serves, La Giralda was just as stunning and magnificent, with unforgettable majestic tableaus and architecture. The scale by which the tableaus were created is just as astonishing as the one in the cathedral. After seeing this whole complex, I told our two tour guides, “You know, this I will tell you, you guys are crazy.”

“You know Willy,” Teresa continues, “Legend has it that the city rulers once said ‘Hagamos una Iglesia tan hermosa y tan grandiosa que los que la vieren labrada nos tengan por locos’ (Let us build a church so beautiful and so grand that those who see it finished will take us for mad)” Well, I certainly fell for it.

“Let us build
a church so
beautiful and
so grand that
those who
see it finished
will take us
for mad.”



Clockwise from top: a boulevard of trees inside Plaza de Espana; a statue of Anibal Gonzales, the architect of Plaza de Espana; the elegant facade of Palacio de San Telmo inside the Palacio de la Condesa de Lebrija; view of Seville from Las Setas



Top to bottom: Setas de Seville, the biggest wood structure in the world; the former minarette now La Giralda a landmark in Seville.

THE MUSHROOM

From the cathedral we made our way to the last stop: the Mushroom. Officially, “The Mushroom” is the Metropol Parasol. It is in downtown Seville where a parking space was suppose to be built while upgrading the ancient market place. However, they stumbled upon an ancient Roman ruin during construction and therefore had to stop. The city officials decided to open a competition and was won by German architect, Jürgen Mayer. “We call it Las Setas or The Mushrooms,” Teresa explained. “But don’t they look more like belgian waffles?” I asked to their delight. It is the latest landmark in Seville and just like the glass pyramid of I.M. Pei in the Louvre, “The Mushroom” is not without its own controversy. “Some people like it, and some don’t,” volunteered Lola. But for this Instagram generation, this will undoubtedly be a most sought-after backdrop.

We enter La Encarnacion Square and rode the elevator to the observation deck of the Mushroom. As we got out of the elevator, the whole city of Seville was in front of us in full panoramic splendor. We made our way up to the highest point soaking up the Iberian sun. It was a very mild undulating ascent and to see the structure up close was the reward for the effort. Made of wood, it claims to be the biggest wood structure in the world. The honeycomb pattern was certainly interesting, and as a person who studied design, I cannot help but take note of its contrast with the “traditional” architecture.

This trip opened a music box. We still need to dig deep into the box and see what other hidden gems are inside. Another Star of India, perhaps? A gem so big it will make anyone go mad.

<https://www.visitasevilla.es/en/official-webguide-seville>