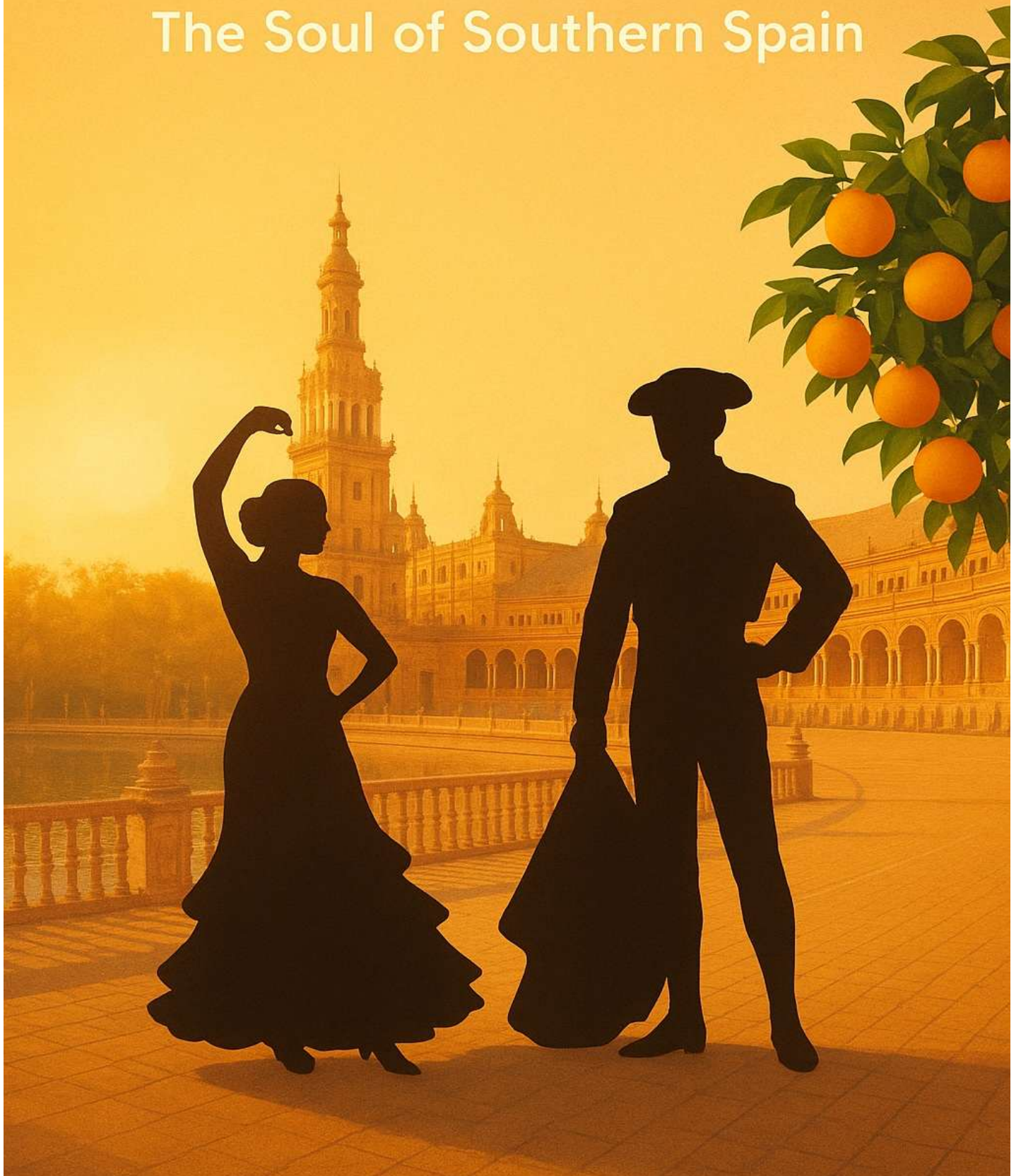


SEVILLE

The Soul of Southern Spain



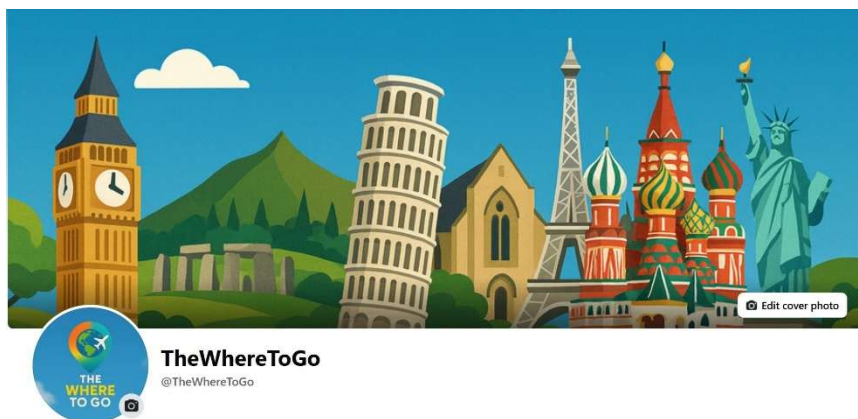
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Seville -The Soul of Southern Spain

While every city in Andalusia has its own unique spirit, many argue that Seville is the region's undisputed soul. It is here that the passions of flamenco, the drama of Holy Week, the joy of the Feria, and the easy-going rhythm of tapas and terrace life are felt most intensely. Seville does not just contain Andalusian culture; it lives and breathes it on every street corner.

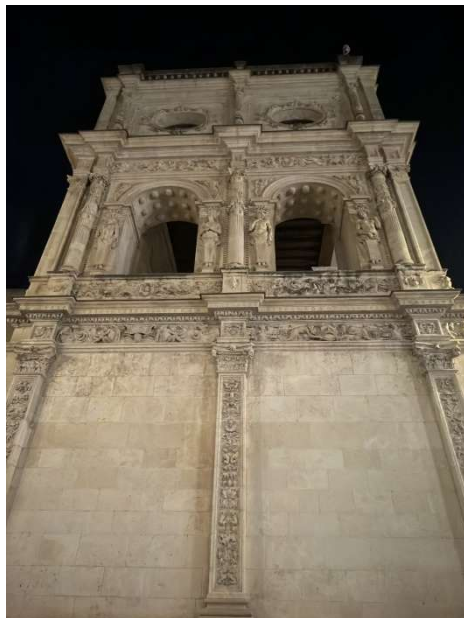
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Introduction

Late on Sunday night, and I suddenly realise that I have a British Airways voucher which expires in just four weeks' time. However, trying to find a destination and a flight, especially using a British Airways voucher, proves to be something of a challenge. I trawled the British Airways website and eventually managed to find a business flight to Seville for just £25 plus an extremely large number of Avios points.

So here I am on my way to Seville and by early evening I am beginning to wonder why I have never been here before. The hotel receptionist has already told me that I do not need to worry about transport because everything is really close. He is not wrong and here are some pictures taken just a short way away from my hotel. I seem to be at the centre of everything. I cannot wait to see this place in the daytime.





Seville

Set in the heart of Andalusia, Seville is a city with serious historical and cultural weight. Its skyline is dominated by the world's largest Gothic cathedral, built on the foundations of the former Great Mosque with the original minaret now serving as the bell tower. Inside the cathedral lies what Spain maintains are the authenticated remains of Christopher Columbus although the Dominican Republic insist that they have him.

The city also boasts the Alcázar, the oldest royal palace in Europe still in use, and one of Spain's architectural masterpieces. Seville's Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza de Caballería de Sevilla is regarded as the spiritual home of bullfighting, and the city shares, with Cádiz and Jerez, the long-running argument over which is the true birthplace of flamenco.

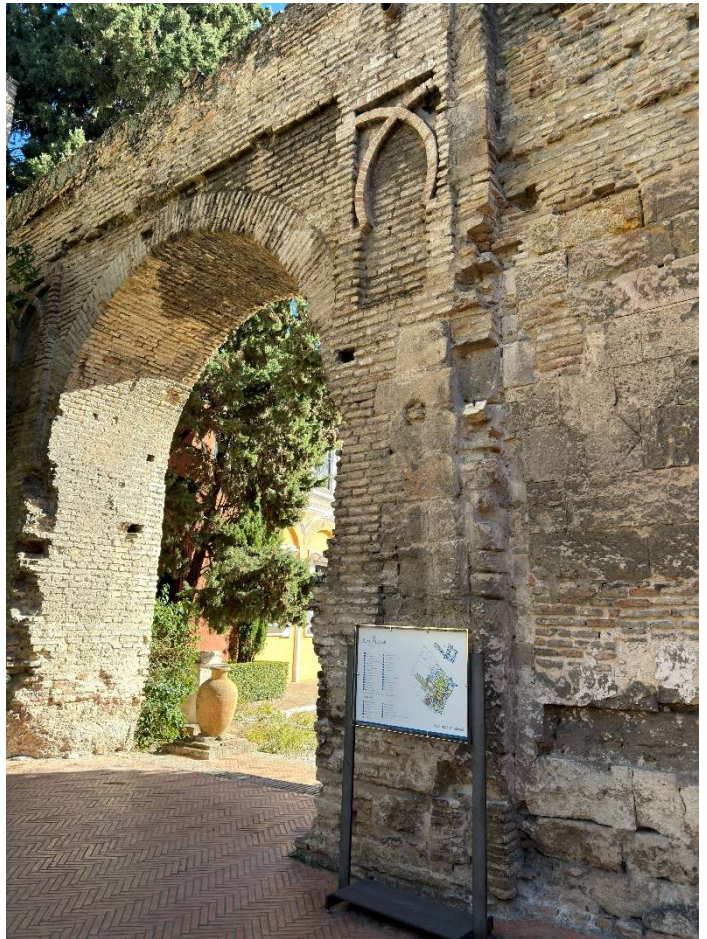
Seville's streets are lined with more than 40,000 bitter orange trees, whose fruit is famously exported to the UK for marmalade. Seville also holds the dubious honour of being the hottest city in continental Europe, with summer temperatures regularly breaking 40°C (104°F). The temperature today is not that hot, but it is a hell of a lot hotter than back in the UK.

Royal Alcázar and Alcázar Palace



The Royal Alcázar of Seville is a UNESCO World Heritage site serving as a residence for the Spanish Royal Family and holding the status of the oldest continually used royal palace in Europe. The transformation from a Muslim fortress began in the 11th century and evolved through various rulers and architectural styles. The architecture represents a fusion of Islamic and European Christian architectural and decorative styles and is a direct result of Christian kings co-opting Moorish craftsmanship after the Reconquista which references the dates (approximately 718 to 1492) of the campaigns to recapture territory from the Muslims (Moors), who had controlled most of the region since the early 8th century.

The palace is a labyrinth of ornate rooms and grand halls, each more detailed than the last. The Patio de las Doncellas (Court of the Maidens), with its long, reflective pool and delicate archways, is the centre piece, designed for tranquillity and governance. Above, the lavish apartments are stunning with gilded woodwork and symbolic imagery. Outside, the palace gardens are quite beautiful and were designed to impress and control, displaying the power and wealth of the ruling class. The palace and the gardens are regularly used as a filming location and provided the backdrop for the Water Gardens of Dorne in series 5 and 6 of 'Game of Thrones'.



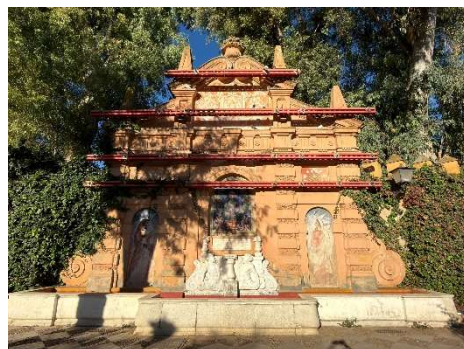


Jardines de Murillo and Jardines de Catalina de Ribera

Beyond the ornate palace and its formal gardens, you will find the Jardines de Murillo and the Jardines de Catalina de Ribera which are two adjoining public spaces that form one continuous stretch of greenery along the Alcázar walls. Both were laid out in the early 20th century on land that once belonged to the Alcázar's orchards.

The Jardines de Murillo is a classic Sevillian park, shaded, informal, and named after Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, the city's celebrated Baroque painter. In contrast, the Jardines de Catalina de Ribera is a more structured promenade named after Catalina de Ribera who was a 15th-century noblewoman from a powerful Sevillian family.

This part is lined with tiled benches, ceramic panels and elegant fountains. It also contains the striking Monument to Christopher Columbus which is a tall twin-column with a sculptured ship attached.



Seville University



Founded in 1505 by the Archdeacon Maese Rodrigo Fernández de Santaella, the University of Seville (Universidad de Sevilla) received its royal charter in 1551 and is considered one of the most prestigious education institutions in Spain. Its origins are deeply intertwined with the city's maritime and colonial history, initially established as the Colegio de Santa María de Jesús.

The university is housed in a magnificent 18th-century building which was originally the iconic Royal Tobacco Factory (Real Fábrica de Tabacos). The Tobacco Factory was famed as the setting for Bizet's opera Carmen. In addition, the university archive, called the Archivo General de Indias, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is situated across the road from Seville Cathedral.



Seville City Hall

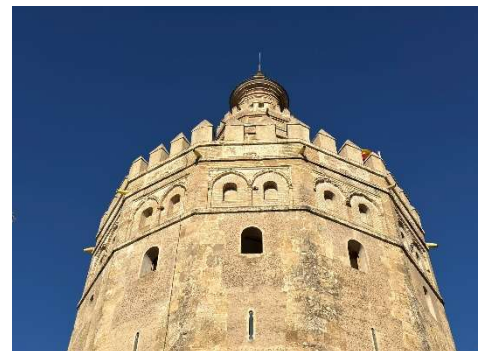
Standing proudly on the Plaza Nueva, the Seville City Hall (*Casa consistorial de Sevilla*) is a magnificent statement of the city's wealth and power during the Renaissance. The building was constructed in the 16th century under architect Diego de Riaño and features some beautifully crafted stonework featuring mythological figures, historical scenes and the city's coat of arms.

The ornate decoration was intended to proclaim Seville's status as the hub of the Spanish Empire's commerce with the New World. While the interior has undergone significant modifications, the original façade remains a stunning and often-underrated masterpiece of civic architecture, symbolising the confidence and artistic ambition of Seville during its Golden Age.



Torre del Oro

Torre del Oro or Tower of Gold is a dodecagonal military watchtower which was completed in 1221 by the Almohad Caliphate to control access to the city, forming part of the defensive walls. Its famous name likely derives from the golden sheen of its original tile cladding or else the reflection of the sun on its lime-mortar, stone and masonry construction. The solitary building stands on the eastern side of the Guadalquivir River and was one of two anchor points on each side of the river for a heavy defensive chain which could be raised to stop ships entering Seville. The other anchor point was a fortified tower on the other bank known as the Castillo de Triana which was heavily damaged in 1248 during the reconquest of Seville by Christian forces from Santander and Cantabria. In honour of the occasion, Santander adopted the Torre del Oro (and the chain) on their municipal coat of arms.



Plaza de Toros



The Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza in Seville is one of the city's most iconic and historic monuments. Its construction began in 1749 to replace a primitive wooden structure, and it was built over the course of following 120 years. Not surprisingly the bullring in Seville is not just any bullring but it is considered to be the spiritual home of bullfighting and one of the most iconic and historically significant in the world.

The arena is extensively used for major concerts and cultural events, but I had no idea that it was still used for bullfighting and remains a significant, though controversial, part of the city's cultural tradition. The main season is during the Feria de Abril (April Fair), which is the highlight of the bullfighting calendar when the most important bullfighting takes place. During this week, the city's iconic bullring, the Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza de Caballería, hosts a series of prestigious corridas (bullfights) featuring the world's top matadors and the finest bulls.

My friends will know my stance on animal cruelty and while bullfighting's popularity has declined in some parts of Spain and it faces strong opposition from animal rights groups, it is still deeply embedded in Andalusian culture and draws large crowds in Seville. Attending a corrida at the historic Maestranza bullring is considered a quintessential Sevillian experience. Personally, I could not think of anything worse.





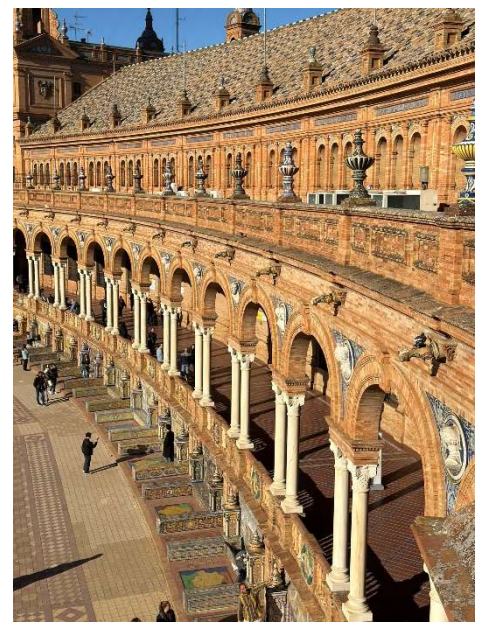
Plaza de Espana

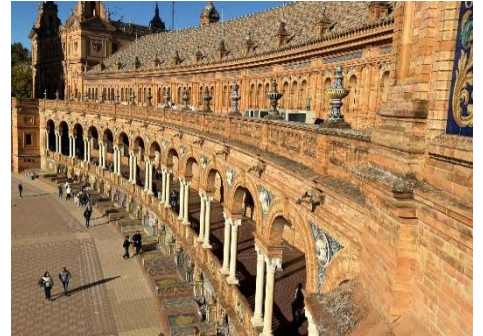


The Plaza de España is a breathtaking, semi-circular complex that is both a grand public square and a monumental piece of architecture. The square was designed by Aníbal González and built in 1928 for the Ibero-American Exposition...a sort of 1929 version of a world expo. The result is a spectacular example of Regionalism Revival, blending Art Deco with Neo-Mudéjar and Renaissance elements.

The vast building, with its central canal is flanked by two towering Venetian-style towers and endless arches reminiscent of a cathedral. Its most charming feature is a series of 48 tiled alcoves running along the curve, each dedicated to a different province of Spain, adorned with beautiful tiles depicting historical events and maps.

The square was intended to highlight Spanish industry and artistry offering a theatrical celebration of the nation's diversity and history. Today, it is a vibrant hub of activity, a favourite spot for leisurely strolls, and a stunning filming location which was used in *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *The Dictator* to name a few.





Setas de Seville

Officially known as the Metropol Parasol but affectionately dubbed 'Las Setas' the Mushrooms by locals, this modern structure in the heart of Seville's old town is a bold and controversial piece of 21st-century architecture. The work was completed in 2011 by Jürgen Mayer and is the world's largest wooden structure with its honeycomb forms create a striking contrast with the surrounding historic buildings.

Visitors can take an to the rooftop walkway, which offers a spectacular and unique panoramic view of the city's rooftops and cathedral spire. Beneath the structure, the Antiquarium museum showcases remarkable Roman and Islamic ruins discovered during its construction. Las Setas is more than just a viewpoint, but I will leave it for you to decide.

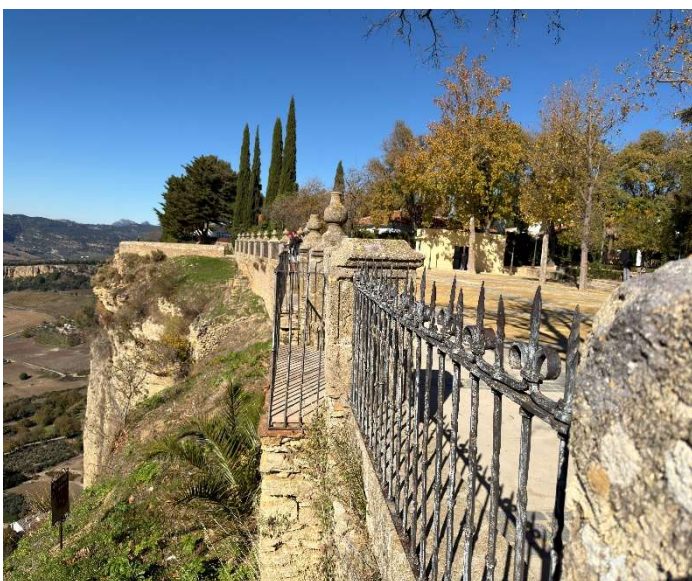


Setenil

Setenil de las Bodegas, which is my next stop, is a two-hour drive from Seville. Unlike many similar towns built on top of cliffs, Setenil is built directly into them, making use of the massive overhangs of the Río Trejo gorge as roofs and walls for its dwellings and streets. The most famous streets, like Cuevas del Sol (Caves of the Sun) and Cuevas de la Sombra (Caves of the Shadow), are breathtaking examples of architecture where the rock face forms the ceiling of restaurants, homes, and shops.

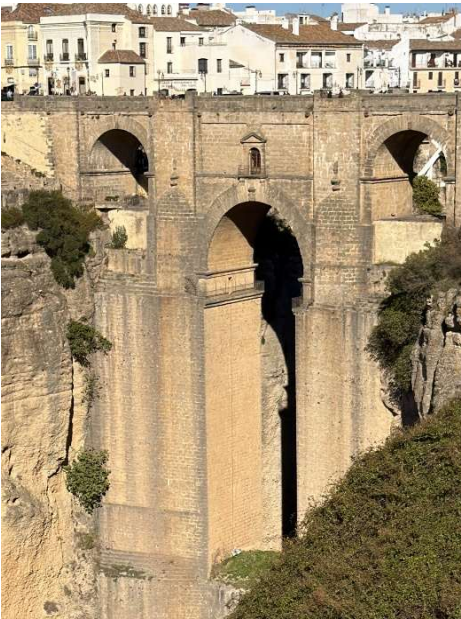
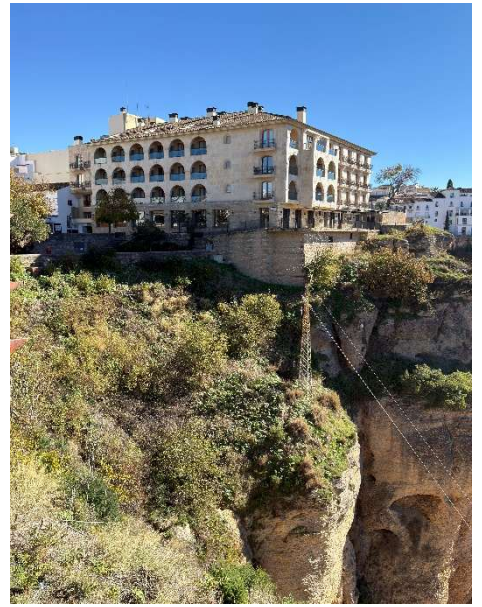


Ronda



Perched precariously on either side of the breathtaking El Tajo Gorge, Ronda is a town of dramatic beauty and profound history. Its most iconic symbol is the Puente Nuevo (New Bridge), an 18th-century engineering marvel that spans the 120-meter chasm, connecting the old Moorish town (La Ciudad) with the newer, 15th-century quarter (El Mercadillo).

Ronda is one of Spain's oldest towns, with origins dating back to the Roman era, and it was a last bastion of Al-Andalus before falling to the Catholics in 1485. It is also considered the birthplace of modern bullfighting, home to the oldest bullring in Spain, the Plaza de Toros. Other than that, there are some amazing views from each side of the gorge that makes this such a special place.





Italica

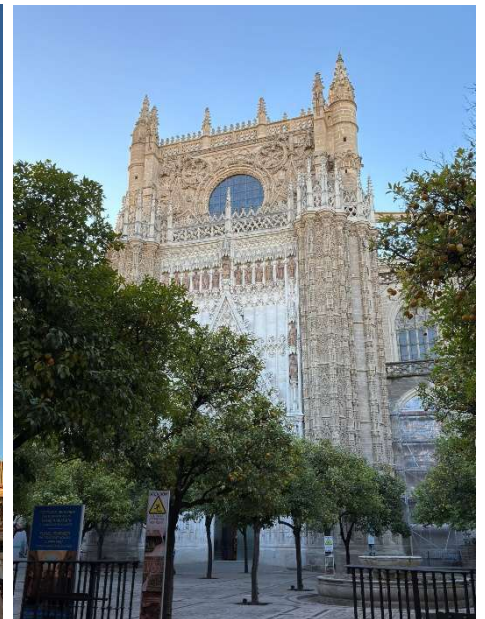
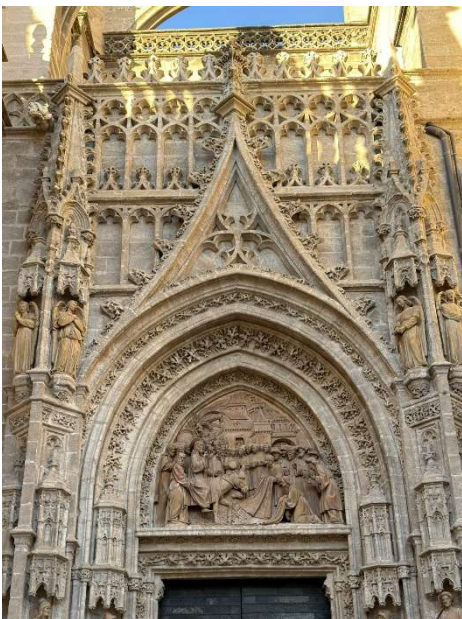
My last day in Seville and I have covered most of the local attractions, so I am once again travelling outside Seville to Italica which is a remarkable archaeological site and the first Roman city founded in Hispania (206 BC). It was also the birthplace of two of Rome's most important emperors: Trajan and Hadrian. Its prestige and wealth are evident in the scale of its ruins, particularly the immense amphitheatre which was one of the largest in the Roman Empire, seating 25,000 spectators.

Walking through the site, you can explore the well-preserved remains of wealthy houses with stunning mosaic floors still intact, such as the House of the Planetarium and the House of the Birds. These intricate mosaics, protected by sand for centuries, offer a glimpse into the daily life and artistry of the Roman elite. The site is massive and hardly crowded. Again, for the fans of the Game of Thrones series, Italica served as a filming location for the dragon pit.

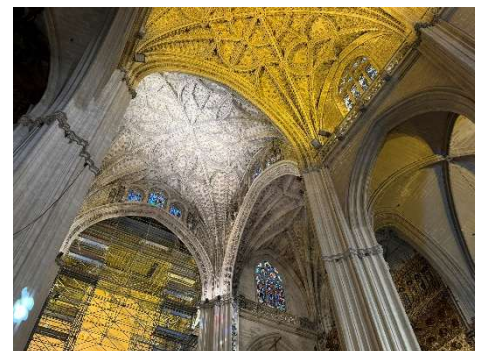


Seville Cathedral and Giralda Tower

The Seville Cathedral, or the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the See, is an awe-inspiring monument of scale and superlatives. It is the largest Gothic cathedral in the world by volume, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the final resting place of Christopher Columbus. Built on the site of the city's grand Almohad Mosque, its construction in the 15th and 16th centuries was a deliberate symbol of Christian triumph.



Stepping inside is an overwhelming experience. The interior is cavernous with its soaring vaults and immense altarpiece inspire a profound sense of wonder. Regardless, the cathedral gracefully incorporates its Islamic past, most notably by preserving the mosque's minaret as its bell tower, the Giralda. This colossal building is not just a church; it is the physical embodiment of Seville's history, faith, and ambition.



The Giralda Tower is Seville's most iconic silhouette, a beautiful hybrid of cultures that tells the city's history from the ground up. Originally constructed in the 12th century as the minaret for the city's Great Mosque under the Almohad dynasty, its elegant, tapering design was inspired by the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakesh. It is remarkable that the Christian conquerors chose not to destroy the minaret but to repurpose it.



In the 16th century, they added a Renaissance-style belfry, crowned with a weathervane statue of Faith, known as 'El Giraldo', which gives the tower its name. Uniquely, instead of stairs, a series of 35 gently sloping ramps lead to the summit, designed so that the muezzin could ride a horse to the top to call the faithful to prayer. The panoramic view of Seville from the top is an unparalleled reward for all that climbing.

The cathedral is also (allegedly) the final resting place of Christopher Columbus whose remains, it seems, have travelled as much as Columbus did when alive. His body was initially buried in the convent of San Francisco in 1506 and in 1513 they were transferred to Seville and deposited in a chapel of the former convent of the Cartuja de Santa María de las Cuevas.

In 1544, his remains were transferred by order of Diego's widow to the main chapel of the Cathedral of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, which at that time belonged to Hispaniola. In 1795, Spain lost control of the eastern part of Hispaniola, and a squadron was sent to Santo Domingo to collect his remains and transfer them to Cuba in the Havana Cathedral. In 1898, when Cuba became independent from Spain, Columbus' remains were returned to Seville and placed in the Cathedral.





Reflection

My trip to Seville was a last-minute dash on the back of an expiring British Airways voucher and, on the basis of a £25 business return ticket, it was never likely to fail but it exceeded my expectations and left me wondering just how many other such places I was missing out on.

The city has a vibrant, lived-in energy which is infused with the scent of orange trees and heightened by the evening buzz from the crowded tapas bars. I managed to get lost in the grounds of the Alcázar and thoroughly enjoyed my day out to Setenil and Ronda as well as my bus ride to the ancient ruins of Itálica.

From the moment I arrived, the city's compact layout of places to visit made exploring effortless. I was struck by the incredible mix of architecture from the crafted stonework of City Hall to the picture book beauty of the Plaza de España and the UNESCO recognised largest Gothic cathedral in the world.

Seville University was an educational experience as I learned about its links to Bizet's Carmen. The bullring highlighted cultural traditions which I would personally confine to history, while accepting that for many it remains a cultural rite of passage.

Ultimately, Seville delivered more than I could have hoped for with stunning attractions at every turn. It turned out to be a fantastic use of that voucher, and a city which I will recommend to everyone I speak to looking for a dose of history, culture and sunshine. I'm just sorry that I didn't visit it sooner.

The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



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