

TRAVELS

By DIANE YORK

Driving Andalusia, Spain

If you think Spain is Flamenco dancers, guitar music, bullfighters, sangria and paella, you are right. Andalusia, the southernmost part of Spain, is all that plus medieval walled towns from the days of the crusades, ancient cathedrals encrusted with gold from the new world, Moorish palaces and gardens, dappled gray Andalusian stallions, and men and women who are clearly related to Antonio Banderas.

On a recent 10-day trip two friends and I explored Andalusia, flying in and out of Madrid and driving the rest in our tiny rental car. The cost of the trip (including airfare) was \$3,000 with rental car cost and some hotel rooms split three ways. You could spend a year or more exploring Spain but for our purposes, we focused on four towns in Andalusia: Cordoba, Seville, Arcos de la Frontera and Ronda.

Driving in Spain can be stressful but exciting. Walled towns have streets that are so narrow you may have no more than two inches between you and the walls on both sides -- a wrong turn can take you into an impossible passage-way. My friends once turned down a wrong street and wound up going down a stone staircase a la "Bourne Identity." Local villagers took pity and literally lifted the car down to the street.

"To Cordoba belong all the beauty and ornaments that delight the eye or dazzle the sight..." This quote describes the beauty and sophistication of Cordoba under Moorish rule in the 8th century after the Arabs conquered Spain. Many of Spain's finest palaces, cathedrals, and administrative buildings with their minarets,

lattice-work screens and vaulted halls are architectural treasures created by the Moors and, thankfully, kept intact. Many of the best are in Cordoba and represent the magnificence of old Spain. We strolled the halls of the Mezquita, an enormous place turned cathedral with red and white arched galleries, and the rooms and grounds of the Alhambra, a palace built for Spanish nobility but in the Arab style with colorful mosaics, fountains and fantastic gardens.

Walking makes you hungry and we found that we could eat a good meal at a corner café for as little as 3 Euros (Russian potato salad -- very creamy with tuna -- meatballs and a drink) or have the menu del dia for about \$10 -15 Euros. The menu del dia is the best value and includes drink (wine or other), desert, an appetizer and an entrée.

Our next stop was Seville, called the "emotional" centre of Spain. Magellan and Vespucci sailed from this town, Murillo painted here. We strolled down to the Guadalquivir River where the Torre del Oro, or tower of gold, guards the port. Christopher Columbus, returning from the new world, sailed past this tower to be greeted by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Seville is a center of Flamenco music and dance. The neighborhood shops are full of flamenco dresses, in loud colors of pink, red, yellow. We attended a show at the Museum of Latin Ballet. The guitar music and Flamenco dance were stunning.

By the river is the monumental Plaza de Toros de la Maestranza, a white and gold monster of a bullring where bullfights have been continuously staged for more than two centuries. Cafés here celebrate the bulls



Above: Cafe in Sevilla. Below: Paella and a glass of sherry from Jerez.



Above: Los Pueblo Blanco, or white village, in Andalusia. Below: A Spanish horseman in Cordoba. Photos by Diane York.

as well as the bullfighters. Heads of the bravest fighting bulls are placed on the walls, along with their names and history. You can buy your own matador cape in the shops.

We left Seville and headed south, past white-washed villages, called the "pueblo blancos." Because Andalusia was once bandit country, many villages are built into protective cliffs with overhanging slabs of stone threatening to crush them. It is so western a landscape that the "spaghetti westerns" like "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" were filmed here. The hillsides are covered with sunflowers and hay (for all those bulls.) We drove through Jerez, and stopped and tasted the warm, sweet sherry it is famous for.

In the distance on the top of a hill stands the fairy tale town of Arcos de la Frontera. We squeezed the car through a labyrinth of old cobbled streets and were far enough south now that palm trees decorate the hills. We stayed at a converted old convent on the side of a cliff. Opening my bedroom window, I am stunned at the 360-foot drop to the Rio Guadalete far below me. We dine on sangria rich with fruit, crusty bread, and share a fava bean and shrimp dish in a tasty broth.



We drove on to Ronda. This town has a fantastic gorge surrounding its old city. A "new bridge," built in the 18th century crosses the 360-foot drop to the Tajo River below. If you stand on this bridge and look over the side you see birds flying below you down to the water. Ronda was one of the last Moorish strongholds because of its impossible location. Shopping at Ronda is more varied and interesting because you are closer to the markets of Morocco. From Ronda you are in easy driving distance to either Gibraltar or Morocco via the ferry at Algeciras to Tangier. You can spend the day in the markets of Tangier and then return by the ferry the same day.

We spent our last night in Andalusia in a small castle in Cordoba turned hostel, we looked out the window and saw a young man in riding pants and boots astride a magnificent white horse riding up the alley between our room and the ancient stone wall of the city. A silver sliver of moon rose above him in the twilight sky. It was a heart-stoppingly beautiful moment and we all gasped. Go... see...Spain. **EP**

Diane York is a free lance writer who travels as often as she can.