

SPAIN: NORTH & SOUTH

'World Heritage Mosaic'

18 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Spain

Welcome to Spain! Arrival in Santiago de Compostela, one of Spain's most beautiful cities, built of golden granite and declared a national monument in its entirety. It's a wonderful place to walk with its arcades and flagstone streets.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Santiago de Compostela: City Tour

This morning we have a walking city tour of Santiago, a UNESCO World Heritage city. Our tour begins at Obradoiro Square where some of its more prominent monuments can be seen: the Archbishop's residence which preserves some 12th century lounges; the Town Hall, former Raxoy Palace, with its classical facade; the San Jeronimo College, whose facade shows Roman influences.

We also include the city's famous cathedral, a truly grand building adorned with many statues of St James in his familiar pilgrim guise with staff, broad-brimmed hat, and scallop-shell badge.

We also visit the Cathedral Museum, the Cloister and finally, the Platerias Gate, the only Romanesque one that is still preserved; and we take a guided tour of the Cathedral roofs,* which allows us to climb to the very top of the building and look out over the historic centre from the heights. To do so we make for the Gelmirez Palace, located to the side of the Cathedral in the Plaza del Obradoiro square. We pass through the interior of the Gelmirez Palace, past the Cathedral gallery (above the Gloria doorway) and up to the roof of the cathedral.

* Impending maintenance on the roof has been announced starting from late winter 2018, and it is unclear as to how long a closure may last. Please be advised that this element may not be possible if the roof tour is unavailable for your chosen departure.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Santiago de Compostela - Leon

This morning we take the train (2nd class) to Leon.*

On arrival in Leon we visit the San Isidoro Collegiate Church, an important piece of western Romanesque, where 23 kings and queens are buried. The cathedral was built in the middle of the 13th century in a gothic style similar to the French cathedrals and is famous for the beauty of more than 100 glazed windows. Our Leon sightseeing continues with the old quarter of the city, which conserves a large part of the medieval wall and some remains of the original Roman wall. One can also find the Casa de Botines, a neo-gothic building and an excellent example of the architecture of Antoni Gaudi.

* NOTE: We use the rail system quite extensively on this tour (except tours ES1 and PS2, which feature only ONE rail journey). YOU MUST BE ABLE TO MANAGE YOUR OWN BAGS ONTO / OFF TRAINS AND IN TRAIN STATIONS. Packing lightly is essential.

Overnight in Leon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Leon - Cave of Altamira - Bilbao

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Today we travel by road to Bilbao, via a stop at the museum connected with the Cave of Altamira. Dating from 12000 BC, the caves are full of prehistoric paintings of wild animals and impressions of human hands. When discovered in the 1870s the vivid and evocative paintings were nearly perfectly-preserved. Even Picasso commented on the paintings here: "After Altamira, everything is decadence." (We will be visiting a museum and a replica of the cave paintings; the actual cave has been closed to visitors in the interest of conservation).

We continue deeper into Basque country and toward Bilbao, tucked into the deep lush folds and clefts of Euskadi's coastal range. The name is "Bilbo" in Basque, but its inhabitants prefer to call it the "botxo," Basque for hole, or orifice. The orifice was originally a scattering of fish hamlets, huddled on the left bank where the hills offered some protection from the Normans and other pirates.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bilbao: The Guggenheim

Today we explore the Old Town of Bilbao on a walking tour. We travel back in time to Medieval Bilbao with its cobbled streets, charming corners and squares, and trace its development through the centuries.

The major highlight today is our visit to the newest and biggest attraction in Bilbao, the Guggenheim Museum. The 31 329 sq m (349,000 sq foot) colossus is one of the focal points of a \$1.5 billion redevelopment plan for the city. The Frank Gehry design features a 50 m- (165 foot-) high atrium, more than one-and-a-half times the height of the rotunda of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York. The museum is devoted to American and European art of the 20th century, featuring (on rotation) the works of such renowned artists as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Picasso, Ernst, Pollock, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Serra, and others.

Options for your free afternoon include: remain at the Guggenheim on your own, the Basque Museum, Fine Arts Museum, a guided boat tour of the estuary, or local bus trip to San Sebastian (+/- 1:20) etc. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your afternoon.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Bilbao - Barcelona: City Tour

Today we fly to Barcelona. On arrival we'll meet our local guide and embark on a panoramic drive through Barcelona, taking in the city's vibrant atmosphere and architectural diversity.

We'll see Plaza España, a grand square surrounded by impressive buildings, colourful mosaic fountains, and a lively atmosphere. We continue past the site of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games and make a stop at Montjuïc viewpoint for breathtaking panoramic views of Barcelona. Here you can capture stunning photos of the city's skyline, the Mediterranean Sea, and the iconic Sagrada Família. Continuing, we'll see Gran Via, one of Barcelona's busiest avenues, lined with shops, restaurants, and historic buildings.

Our final stop will be Park Güell, Antoni Gaudí's whimsical UNESCO World Heritage Site. Wander through the colourful mosaic pathways, explore the iconic lizard statue, and admire the unique architectural elements that have made this park a must-see destination.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Barcelona: City Tour

We continue our guided touring of Barcelona, starting with a discovery walk through the historic Barrio Gótico district. We'll wander through the narrow, winding streets, marvel at the Gothic architecture, and see iconic landmarks such as the Barcelona Cathedral and the Royal Palace, immersing ourselves in the city's rich history and cultural heritage.

After exploring the Barrio Gótico, we transfer to the Sagrada Família, Antoni Gaudí's masterpiece and one of the most iconic landmarks in Barcelona. We'll have a guided tour of the basilica, admiring its intricate architecture, stained glass windows, and towering spires. Throughout we'll learn about Gaudí's vision for this extraordinary structure and its progress over time.

After our visit to the Sagrada Família, you'll have the balance of the day at leisure for lunch and some independent exploration.

Art lovers may choose to visit other notable attractions such as the Picasso Museum, featuring an extensive collection of works, spanning his entire career. The National Art Museum of Catalonia contains a vast collection of Catalan art, from the Middle Ages to the present day. At the Joan Miró Foundation you can discover the whimsical and surreal works of Joan Miró, one of Spain's most celebrated artists.

Otherwise you can enjoy a leisurely afternoon in one of Barcelona's many parks, such as Parc de la Ciutadella or Parc de l'Estació del Nord, and/or stroll along La Rambla, the city's most famous street, lined with shops, cafes, and street performers.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Barcelona: Montserrat & Leisure Time

This morning we include a half-day guided tour of one of Spain's most sacred sites, set in beautiful mountains about one hour's drive from Barcelona. Long before we reach Montserrat, we will see the jagged silhouette of the great peak and understand how it got its name ('serrat' means 'serrated'). This massive rock fortress is dotted with paths, stairs, caves, chapels, and hermitages. We drive through the Montserrat Natural Park and up to the Sanctuary, located at 725m (2,380 feet) above sea level. On a clear day you will see breathtaking panorama of the Pyrenees.

Arriving at the Sanctuary, we visit the Royal Basilica and the Chapel of Our Lady of Montserrat. Inside the chapel is the famous 12th century Romanesque carved wood statue of La Moreneta (the Black Virgin). La Moreneta is the patron saint of Catalonia and is a presence strongly felt and revered; indeed this celebrated statue has made the Royal Basilica one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Spain. The tour also includes entrance to an interesting audiovisual exhibition ("Montserrat Portes Endins"), and the chance to taste four locally-produced liquors.

We return to Barcelona with time at leisure.

Overnight in Barcelona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Barcelona - Madrid: Royal Palace

Today we travel to Madrid by fast train (+/- 3 hours).

This afternoon we include a tour of the Royal Palace* where we see, among other things, its principal staircase, throne, gala dining room, museum of silver, and principal courtyard. This is the official residence of the royal family, but today it is used only state ceremonies. Otherwise known in Spanish as the Palacio Real, the Royal Palace was built during the 18th and 19th centuries, and is a monumental building. It replaced the former medieval Alcazar, which was burnt to the ground in 1794. The present day Royal Palace of Madrid was decorated to the tastes of Charles III, and is extremely lavish inside.

* Please note that the palace is periodically closed without notice due to official functions. We apologize if this activity is not possible.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Madrid & The Prado

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This morning we have a panoramic tour of broader Madrid, terminating at the Prado Museum for a guided tour. Our route to the museum likely takes us past Plaza Espana point and the Cervantes Monument.

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. For the purposes of our visit, however, we will concentrate on works by Spanish masters -- Velasquez, Goya, Ribera, El Greco, Zurbaran, to name a few.

After our tour, we'll head off on foot for an informal stroll up Gran Via and into the old quarter of Madrid. You'll then have free time for lunch and an afternoon of independent exploration. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your free time, with recommended shopping, other historical sites and galleries. You may want to visit the nearby Reina Sofia for the important modern art collection, including Picasso's masterpiece, "Guernica." Or visit the Museo Naval, one of the world's most important Navy Museums, to learn about the history of the Spanish Armada.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Madrid: Toledo Day Trip

This morning we travel to 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.

Our excursion includes a visit to the Cathedral, as well as the Santa Maria la Blanca Synagogue, which shows the influence of the Granada Moors.

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 and some free time in Toledo, we return to Madrid.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Madrid - Cordoba: City Tour

Today we travel by fast train to Cordoba (+/- 2 hours), crossing the Despenaperros Mountains and the border pass between Castile and Andalucia.

During our time in Cordoba (a World Heritage City), we will gain a sense of the city's long and varied past and multicultural nature. Our tour starts at the Roman Bridge and the Calahorra Tower, an Arab defensive tower. Next we arrive at the Mezquita-Catedral, or Great Mosque of Cordoba, one of the oldest structures still standing from the time Muslims ruled Al-Andalus. The buildings on this site are as complex as the extraordinarily rich history they illustrate. Historians believe that there had first been a temple to the Roman god, Janus, on this site. The temple was converted into a church by invading Visigoths who seized Cordoba in 572. Next, the church was converted into a mosque and then completely rebuilt by the descendants of the exiled Umayyads -- the first Islamic dynasty who had originally ruled from their capital Damascus (in present-day Syria) from 661 until 750.

We visit the Alcazar 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.

Please note: Our official meal plan for today is "breakfast & dinner"; however, due to other variables, however (such as hotel location), your Tour Leader may choose to include lunch instead of dinner today. You will, of course, be advised in advance.

Overnight in Cordoba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Cordoba - Granada

Our tour continues to 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.

On arrival we visit the Royal Chapel, featuring tombs carved out of marble by the Tuscan sculptor Domenico Fancelli. As both Queen Isabel and King Fernando died before the Royal Chapel was finished, they were first buried in the Friary of San Francisco in the Alhambra. They were then later moved to the chapel once it had been completed, and buried alongside King Felipe and Queen Juana. Although their original idea was for all future Spanish Kings and Queens to be buried here, this did not happen as the monastery in El Escorial was used instead.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Granada: The Alhambra

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.

The balance of the day is at leisure for independent exploration, or you can join your Tour Leader on an informal stroll in the city's old Moorish quarter of the Albaicin.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 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'll visit the Casa Museo Don Bosco, which offers a unique glimpse into the life and work of Saint John Bosco, a 19th-century Italian Catholic priest known for his work with young people. We'll explore the museum's collections, which include personal items of Don Bosco, historical documents, and artifacts related to his work.

Ronda is of course 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.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Ronda - Pileta Caves - Olive Oil Tour - 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 the route known as "the Route of the White Villages" for the singularity of the scenery. The villages -- Pueblos Blancos -- are a series of whitewashed towns and villages in the northern part of the provinces of Cádiz and Málaga, mostly within the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. These charming settlements feature whitewashed houses festooned with pots of colourful flowers, mountain vistas, and traces of the Islamic and Christian past.

For a bit of a break we stop briefly in the White Town of Grazalema, a white hill down nestled in Grazalema National Park, before continuing to a visit to one of the region's olive oil producers for a tour and lunch (included instead of dinner today). The region is renowned for extra virgin olive oil, which transmits all the aroma, the flavour, and the essence of the olive groves of Zahara de la Sierra. The process is difficult and extreme, with steep slopes which require manual caretaking and harvesting; the reward is a very fruity, sweet, and gentle flavour partly due to high rainfall in the area. We will learn all about this process and have a chance to taste both the oil and the wine also made locally. Our visit will culminate with a lunch typical of the region with an assortment of tapas, local cheeses, fruits and other sweets (vegetarians are well-catered for).

After a relaxing lunch, we proceed to Sevilla arriving late afternoon. Though we don't include dinner this evening, our hotel is well-placed and your Tour Leader will provide suggestions for your free time.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 17 Sevilla: City Tour

Seville, a vibrant tapestry of Andalusian charm, is the fourth-largest city in Spain and the cultural heart of the region. Its picturesque streets are lined with restored Moorish architecture, fragrant orange groves, and flower-filled patios. The city's lively atmosphere is further enhanced by the rhythmic sounds of castanets, a hallmark of Seville's flamenco heritage.

During our visit, we'll immerse ourselves in Seville's rich history and architectural wonders. The Seville Cathedral, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, boasts stunning stained glass windows, a magnificent choir, and numerous chapels. (Time-permitting) ascend the iconic Giralda Tower for breathtaking panoramic views of the city.

Step back in time at the Alcázar Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Europe's oldest royal residences. Explore its intricate Moorish architecture, lush gardens, and grand halls.

Along the banks of the Guadalquivir River, we'll encounter historic landmarks such as the Maestranza Bullring, a symbol of Seville's bullfighting tradition, and the Torre del Oro, a 13th-century watchtower.

For a contemporary touch, admire the Monument to Tolerance by Eduardo Chillida, a striking sculpture that symbolizes peace and understanding. The Guadalquivir riverbank and view historic monuments like the Maestranza Bullring, the Torre del Oro, and the Monument to the Tolerance by Eduardo Chillida.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Depart

Departure from Sevilla.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast