



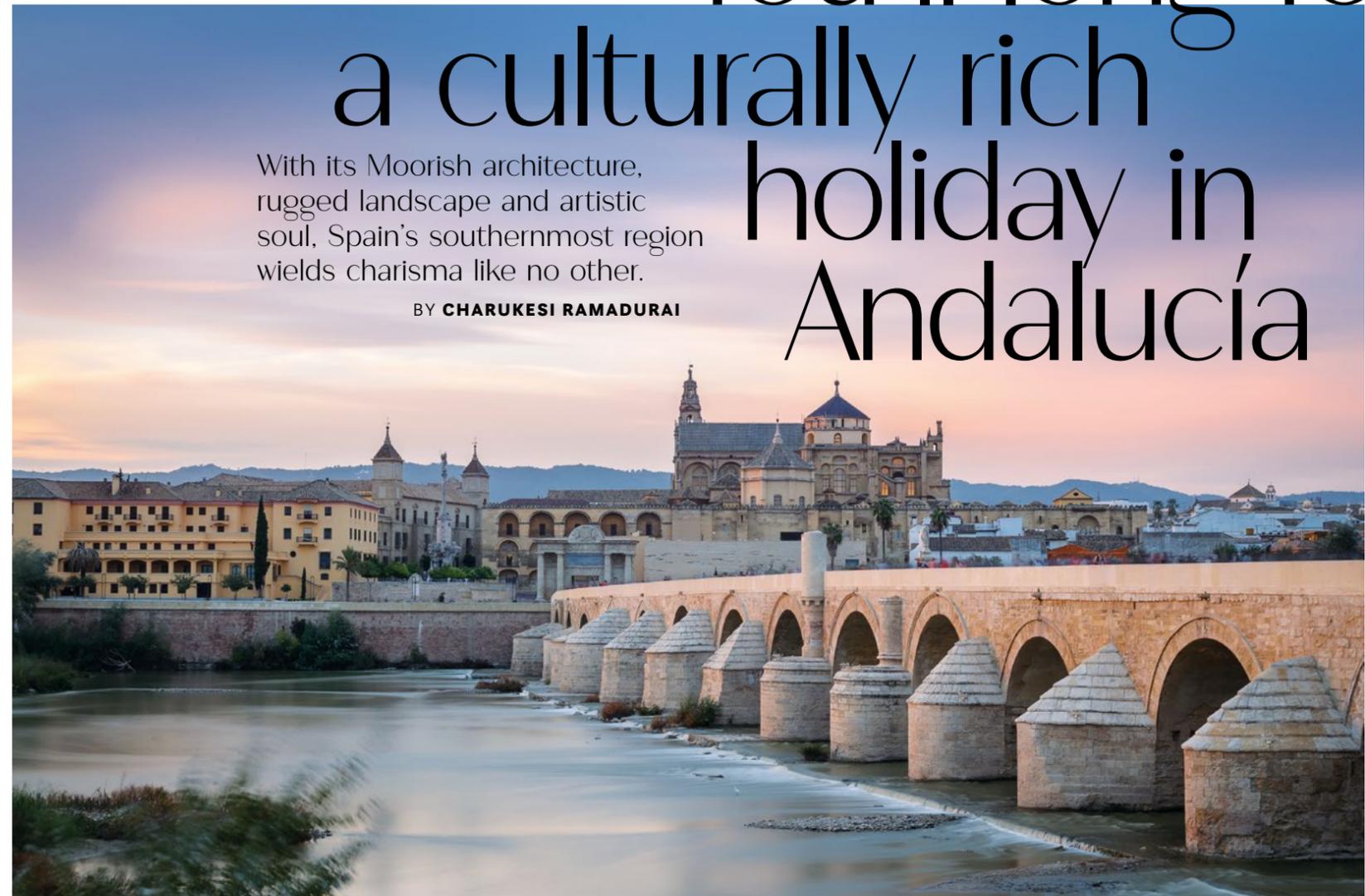
The famed arches of the Mezquita, also known as the Great Mosque of Córdoba. The monument is a symbol of the religious changes the city has undergone over the centuries

TRAVEL

# You'll long for a culturally rich holiday in Andalucía

With its Moorish architecture, rugged landscape and artistic soul, Spain's southernmost region wields charisma like no other.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



TRAVEL

Sitting at home, weary from the dry travel spell created by the long lockdown across the world, my mind wanders to that late spring day in Córdoba. In this mental image, the Andalusian land is ablaze with flowers, growing wild along the highways and carefully nurtured in colourful mud pots hanging from bright white walls inside the towns. I have always thought of Spain as a series of clichés: bullfighting, flamenco and tapas, liberally doused with sunshine and served up with sangria. Embarking on my road trip through Andalucía, I was intent on discovering if there is more to the region than meets the eye.

The region collectively known as Andalucía is the golden triangle of travel in the south of Spain, with Córdoba sitting at its tip, and Granada and Seville as its arms. This area, historically known as Al-Andalus or Islamic Iberia, is where remnants of the

land's Muslim and Moorish past are starkly visible: in the opulent palaces studded with brilliant blue azulejo tiles and the decadent hammam (Arabic baths) that offer soak, scrub and spa services to weary travellers; and of course, in the magnificent places of worship that have been repurposed across various faiths and still wear the symbols of their multi-layered history.

Of its storied past, there is no example more splendid than Córdoba. The cobblestoned lanes of the historic centre, the view of the medieval stone bridge across the Guadalquivir river, even the tiny shops selling kitschy souvenirs — I am totally enchanted by this small town. I am determined to wear out my shoes exploring every nook and cranny, and that's even before I lay eyes on the famed Mezquita.

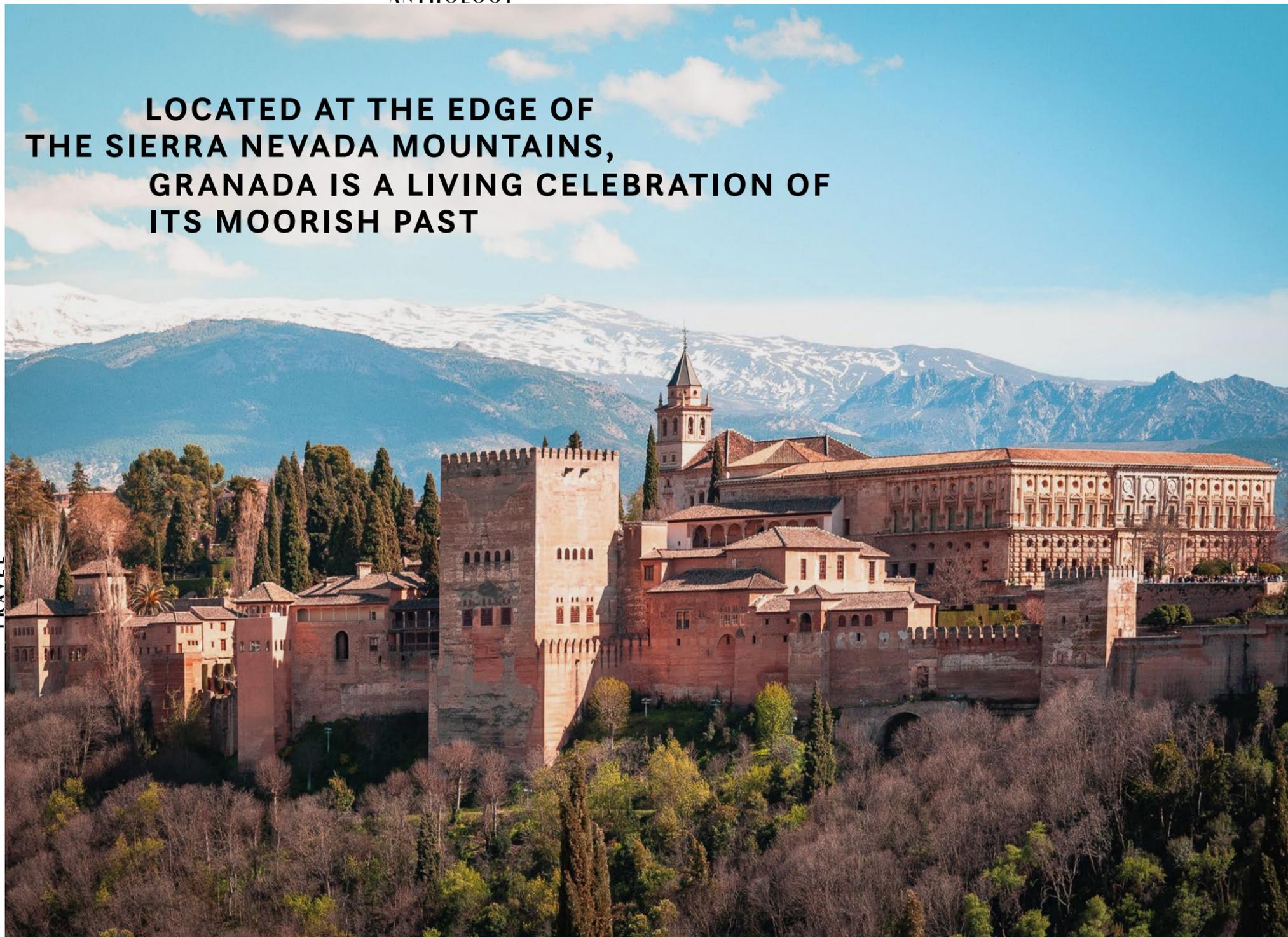
Also known as the Great Mosque of Córdoba, it is the glorious symbol of a time — from the eighth century — when three major faiths lived and prayed in harmony.



(from top) Sunset colours over Córdoba's Mezquita and Roman bridge; The cobblestoned lanes of Córdoba's historic centre

PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES, PAUL GILMORE/UNSPASH

## LOCATED AT THE EDGE OF THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, GRANADA IS A LIVING CELEBRATION OF ITS MOORISH PAST



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(clockwise, from top) Granada's Alhambra palace in spring; Taking its name from the Arabic words for "red castle", the Alhambra has a strategic vantage point with panoramic views of the city; Flamenco is an integral part of Andalusian culture

Now a museum, the Mezquita is an ornate cathedral built right in the midst of what was an austere mosque. The interiors of this mosque-cathedral, with its tall pillars and high arches, are peaceful with whispered prayers floating faintly in the air, even as the lanes enclosing it are abuzz with the noise of eager tourists. It is the kind of place my husband and I both want to go back to again and again, and we do, until it's time to leave Córdoba.

Of course, Córdoba — and indeed, Andalucía itself — is much more than this syncretism. It is also about duende, a Spanish term for the overwhelming emotion that finds expression in art, or powerful magnetism, charisma. Here, my first brush with duende is the flamenco. On a sultry night, sitting in a small, dark room with a bunch of strangers at the Tablao Flamenco Cardenal, watching the man and woman on stage whirl and whip around,

PHOTOS: DIMITRY B./UNSPASH,  
ISAK GUNDRÖSEN/UNSPASH,  
CHARUKESTRAMADURAI

stamping their feet and moving their hands to the music, I also come to realize that duende can be contagious, affecting the artist and audience equally.

I am smitten by the flamenco, and catch another performance in Granada, tapping my foot and clapping my hands late into the night. Located at the edge of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Granada is a living celebration of its Moorish past. From the open terrace of our guesthouse in Albayzin,

high up in the old Arab Quarter, I can see a mosaic of terracotta-tiled white houses down below. From here, we walk up and down the city's narrow winding lanes to Alhambra palace.

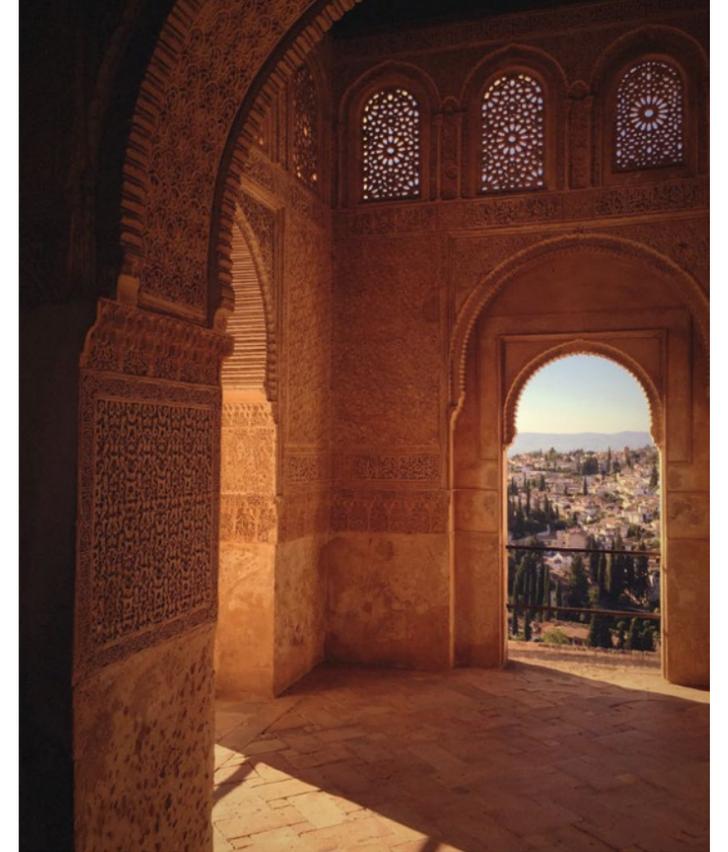
With its multiple royal chambers and places of worship, landscaped gardens and terraces with expansive vistas of the rocky landscape, the Alhambra is considered Granada's crowning glory. The crowds waiting to get in are spilling onto the streets when we arrive late in the afternoon, and all we can manage is a quick tour of the gardens. In a nod to what the Moors considered most precious in their land, there is water, water everywhere in these gardens — cascading fountains and crystal-clear ponds that add a bit of nip to the air.

On our way back to the guesthouse, we stop to listen to a group of men jamming on their guitars in front of an appreciative crowd at the small piazza at Albayzin, breathing in the heady scent of ripe oranges hanging low on the trees lining the square. In the distance, the Alhambra is twinkling with all its lights on, as the last vestiges of snow on the Sierra Nevada glisten in the moonlight.

The next morning, we hike through the old town to get to the heart of Granada, where the Granada Cathedral and the Royal Chapel are located. After, at the Basilica San Juan de Dios, we linger, admiring the unexpected grandeur of its gilded baroque interiors. Medieval European cathedrals

were designed to evoke a sense of awe, even fear in its people. And so it is here, as at Seville Cathedral — officially known as the Catedral de Santa María de la Sede — the world's largest Gothic cathedral that was built in the mid-15th century on a site that used to house a mosque. Not surprising, given that after nearly seven centuries of Islamic rule, Christianity reclaimed what it considered its own land in the 1400s.

The interiors of this massive cathedral hold the final resting place of famed explorer Christopher Columbus, as well as several exquisite paintings by Spanish artists such as Francisco de Goya and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. After the church tour, we climb up the Giralda,



TRAVEL



**THE REGION KNOWN AS ANDALUCÍA IS THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OF TRAVEL IN THE SOUTH OF SPAIN, WITH CÓRDOBA SITTING AT ITS TIP, AND GRANADA AND SEVILLE AS ITS ARMS. HISTORICALLY KNOWN AS AL-ANDALUS OR ISLAMIC IBERIA, THIS AREA IS WHERE REMNANTS OF THE LAND'S MUSLIM AND MOORISH PAST ARE STARKLY VISIBLE**

TRAVEL

**SOAK IT IN**

A legacy of the Moors, these Arabic baths have hot, tepid and cold pools, and repeated dips in waters of varying temperatures is believed to soothe and stimulate the nervous and circulatory systems. Most popular baths also offer massages and other salon therapies at an extra charge, along with sauna, steam and jacuzzi rooms.



**Córdoba — Baños Árabes**  
A 1930s mansion in the Jewish quarter close to the Mezquita, now converted into a hammam, it also offers rooms on the top floor.  
[bañosarabesdecordoba.com](http://bañosarabesdecordoba.com)



**Granada — Al Andalus**  
Sitting on what's believed to be a 13th century hammam that was shut down in the 1500s by Christian rulers, this was converted into a baker's workshop and reopened as a hammam in 1998.  
[granada.hamamalandalus.com/en/](http://granada.hamamalandalus.com/en/)



**Seville — Aire de Sevilla**  
Housed in the 16th-century mansion of a wealthy merchant, this luxurious bathhouse sprang from the foundations of a Roman ruin from the 1st century.  
[beaire.com/en/aire-ancient-baths-sevilla](http://beaire.com/en/aire-ancient-baths-sevilla)

PHOTOS INSTAGRAM/@BANOSARABESCORDOBA, @HAMMALANDALUS AND @AIREANCIENTBATHS\_ES



PHOTOS ANDREA LEOPARDI/UNSPASH, HENRIQUE FERREIRA/UNSPASH



(clockwise, from left) Just like it is throughout Seville, Plaza de España, is a sight to behold with its incredible architecture; The Alcázar of Seville still functions as a palace for the royal family; Seville Cathedral

the bell tower that was once the mosque's minaret. From the top, I can see the Plaza del Triunfo, one of the city's main open squares, with its numerous al fresco cafés and tapas bars, and the Alcazar, the royal palace that is a mishmash of Christian and Mudéjar (post-Moorish) architectural styles, built and rebuilt over the centuries.

The Alcazar still functions as a palace for the royal family, particularly during weddings and important ceremonies. And like everywhere else in Andalucía, there

are inscriptions and symbols praising the gods of both Christian and Islamic faiths scattered through the palaces and patios. The gardens are particularly delightful here too, offering perfect spots to laze around on a sunny spring morning, and I can see that most tourists in Seville have the same idea.

This Andalucía road trip has been one of many firsts for me — tapping my foot to flamenco late into the warm night, unwinding in the hot and cold pools of a hammam after a long day of walking, eating delicious churros straight from the pan and dipped in frothy hot chocolate, downing creamy paella with multiple glasses of tinto de Verano, the summery cousin of sangria. Just thinking back on this trip is enough to brighten any dreary day back home.



TRAVEL