



Whether at a traditional tavern (top) or a new-age pub, when in Córdoba, remember to sample local specialities such as tapas, *tinto de verano*, *tortilla de patata* and *salmorejo* (bottom).

THE MOOR'S PAST HIGH

A CULTURAL CONFLUENCE IN THE SUNNY SOUTH OF SPAIN LEADS TO DELIGHTFUL DISCOVERIES IN ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORY BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Spring was in the air. Madrid was ablaze with pink and purple, yellow and orange flowers; the streets were buzzing with sounds and sights of performance art; the museums were practically empty. Leaving all this behind after just a couple of days was tough, but my husband and I were determined to head down south to warmer climes and cultures.

We were on a road trip in the south of Spain last year, hoping to visit regions that still carried strong remnants of its Moorish past. We had narrowed the list to three main cities—Córdoba, Granada and Seville, that beckoned from the map like some kind of golden trail of heritage. These were the superstars of the times when the Moors, a nomadic tribe of Berber descent from North Africa, ruled

over the area.

On what unfolded as a memorable trip, our first stop—Córdoba—also turned out to be the most compelling. This is a city situated less than 400 kilometres from the Spanish capital. At the height of its glory, around the 8th century, Córdoba had over 300 splendid mosques and palaces—enough to rival other glorious cities like Constantinople and Damascus. Not surprising, given that this city, perched on a sharp bend of the Guadalquivir river, served as the capital of the region during both Roman and Moorish eras. In a nod to its rich past, Córdoba has enjoyed UNESCO World Heritage

status since 1984.

Not too many of the 300 structures survive in present day Córdoba, but then, I was only interested in one—the Mezquita. The undisputed highlight of Córdoba, the Mezquita is a magnificent mosque originally built over 1,200 years ago, before it was converted into a cathedral in the early 16th century by King Carlos—it had been in use as a Christian place of worship since the reconquest of 1236. In today's

times, when communal forces readily raise their ugly heads, the Mezquita came as a pleasant reminder of an age when Muslim, Christian and Jewish cultures intermingled in this





At the height of glory, Córdoba had over 300 splendid mosques and palaces, rivalling cities like Constantinople

city, giving it an air of sophistication. The mosque-cathedral, or Mezquita-Catedral de Córdoba, sits bang in the heart of the old city. Its tall tower was visible from a distance, as we threaded our way through narrow lanes lined with souvenir shops on both sides. By a happy coincidence, this monument is located in the town's *judería*, or Jewish quarter. Despite the steady swell of tourists, the interiors of this monument wore a solemn silence, the building itself reflecting the weight of its history, urging us to respect it. Even trigger-happy photographers put away their selfie sticks, just as chattering groups shushed down on their own.

It is impossible to be unmoved by the grandeur of the scene: arches and pillars in Moorish architectural style, with a spacious cathedral right in the middle of what used to be a mosque, and frescos of cherubic winged angels on the ceiling. At the same time, there is a simplicity and fluidity about the space that invites open expression of faith and joy, as much as serious introspection.

Back in the Andalusian sunshine, it took us some time to shake off the



The Mezquita (top left)—a magnificent mosque converted into a cathedral in the early 16th century—is replete with artwork including ornate stained glass windows (top right); Narrow cobblestone lanes flanked by interesting buildings highlight Córdoba's architecture (bottom).

feeling of awe that had enveloped us inside. Although the town is primarily known for its classical buildings and piazzas, it has an unmistakable youthful vibe. Like other small Western European towns, there are cobblestone lanes, al fresco cafés and a riverside promenade. Add to this the call of fiery flamenco every evening, and the allure of Moorish-age baths. It was easy to see, why Córdoba became an immediate favourite with both of us.

Fighting a strong urge to just walk around the city, I made time for a soak in the hot and cool pools at the restored Hammam Al Andalus. With its colourful mosaics, massive pillars and lilting Arabic music wafting out from hidden speakers, the bath seemed more like an extension of my cultural quest, rather than time off from playing tourist. Hammams in the Andalusian region were originally built around the 13th century, only to be closed



The Roman bridge of Córdoba (top) hulks over the Guadalquivir river; The flamboyance of flamenco is treasured and showcased through frequent performances (bottom) in the city.

towards the end of the 15th century during the Catholic era and finally restored to part of their former glory in the last few decades.

The next day, we continued our aimless exploration of the lanes around the Mezquita, with its tightly-packed buildings coloured blue, yellow and red in no obvious pattern, coming together to create a cheery vibe. The rest of the evening was spent walking through

town. We gazed up at lattice iron balconies covered with blue flowerpots, and sampled caramelised nuts in old-fashioned chocolateries. We found ourselves in spacious courtyards—a classic element of south Spanish residences of the age—often stumbling upon boutiques that have now sprung up in these repurposed buildings.

From time to time we stopped to rest our feet at one of the open piazzas,

which are cooled by stone fountains and small pools. When all the walking left us hungry, we sat down for a round of tapas (starting with *salmorejo*, a thicker and more flavourful cousin of gazpacho) and *tinto de verano* (a lighter, summery version of sangria) at the first bar we stumbled upon. Later at night, we found ourselves back at the Mezquita. Right opposite was Córdoba's popular bar Casa Santos that we had missed earlier. Somehow, we found the space in our stomachs for just one slice of their famous *tortilla de patata* (potato omelette).

Getting lost in an urban labyrinth had never been more fun.



ESSENTIALS

There are no direct flights from India to Cordoba. Most flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Cordoba require one or more layovers in Spanish gateway cities such as Madrid and Málaga. Cordoba is only a four-hour drive away from capital Madrid. There are also several high-speed train services, such as AVE, that take less than three hours,