

## Travel Group Report The Magic of Andalusia



17 Group members visited southern Spain in late March, joining a mainstream tour operator's trip with a total party size of 44. Leaving from Gatwick, an event-free two plus hour journey took us to Malaga where we stayed overnight. The following morning there was a trip to the Picasso Museum which had just received a further 33 items of this locally-born artist's work. The tour rep recommended a tapas bar for lunch; many made their way there and the rep helped those who were a little unsure with what they were doing. The afternoon saw the coach journey to Granada.

The party spent two nights in the city which included a guided trip around the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the stunning Alhambra, something travellers seeking to organise themselves on the day would have found wasn't possible until May! There was a city orientation tour and plenty of opportunity to visit other sites such as the narrow roads and alleys of the Albaicin. A spectacular Flamenco show was visited one evening, a seemingly authentic event with fine examples of baile (dance) and palmas (handclapping) and the other elements of this local art-form. A surprise too for one of our number whose milestone birthday was marked with bubbly and a cake for the happy band of U3A travellers.

We then went off to the lesser-known Baeza and Ubeda. These towns displayed grand architecture untouched by the Moorish influence but funded by gold from Spanish conquests in an ornate Renaissance style. These were a little unexpected by some and all the more interesting for that. An optional trip was undertaken by virtually everyone in the party from Baeza up into the mountains, the Parque de Cazorla, where among the views were some which rivalled the best lake views you might find elsewhere, with fabulous views and sights. A close-up sighting of a grazing Ibex, a male with horns, was an unexpected highlight, though several groups were seen over the day.

Leaving Barza the party visited an olive Museum which was a lot more than an opportunity for the locals to set us their wares. We were taken through processes and history and learnt via the

guide how the olive industry played a significant part in the area's culture. The building was set up in such a way that you could follow both the process and the history and was a most memorable occasion.

Cordoba came next with an orientation tour and a guided tour of the great mosque, the Mezquita, which featured a huge cathedral right in the heart of the building marking efforts to obliterate the Moorish influence a key element of Southern Spain's history. This city also had a 15 arch Roman Bridge with cormorants and herons standing ready in the wide shallow waters flowing slowly underneath. Walking around the narrow alleys of the Juderia, the Jewish Quarter, you could get a feel of the old city and by careful observation, view some of the patios, the open spaces in the centre of the houses around which the accommodation was constructed, the patio bringing light into the house. And there were plenty of opportunities to try local tapas again.

A short visit to Seville on the journey to the tour's final destination and a welcome improvement in temperature. This magnificent city has so many sights that little justice to them could be done. However a visit to Plaza de Espana, the semi-circular plaza centrepiece of a 1929 exposition had to be one, while the included trip to the cathedral had to be another. The cathedral features La Giralda, a bell tower with a huge weathervane at the top where the top level is accessed via a continuous circular slope rather than steps.

So finally then to Jerez de la Frontera. The tour included a visit to the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art, an extraordinary place where even those with little interest in horses could not fail to be captivated by the majesty of the animals and their lives and those of their riders and trainers. A visit too to a sherry bodega (including sampling) and the carriage museum were also undertaken. And there was still half a day over for exploring this fine town.

The return from Malaga airport followed at the end of the nine-night trip, something of a whirlwind tour but for those who hadn't been to these places before, a fine way of seeing the sights and experiencing something of the culture.

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