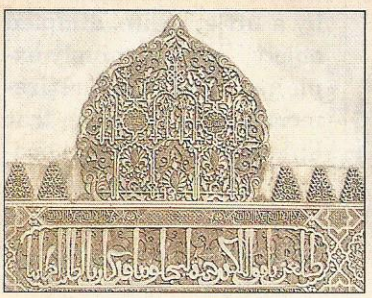
From Al-Andalus To Andalucía

A TRIP THROUGH HISTORICAL AND BEAUTIFUL ISLAMIC SPAIN AND ITS CITIES OF SEVILLE, GRANADA, AND CORDOBA.

BY BRIAN EVANS

I stood in the square of the church of San Nicolas, at the peak of the hilly Albaicín neighborhood in the Spanish city of Granada. I peered across the narrow valley to the grand Alhambra palace sprawled atop the opposite hill. The Sierra Nevada hovered in the background. Nearby, an old Gypsy woman clacked a pair of castanets incessantly, hoping, apparently, to use the power of sheer annoyance to sell her wares. A couple of small tour groups wandered around the square, squinting at the Alhambra from different angles. They had ridden up in buses. I had walked. I was too tired to wander.



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Hiking around Albaicín, especially without a map, can be a physically breathtaking experience. The hills are steep, and it is extremely difficult to orient yourself within the narrow, winding streets and high, white walls. My strategy was simple: to keep walking up. The neighborhood was immaculately well kept, especially toward the summit, and the views of the Alhambra and the surrounding mountains were ample reward for my exertions. More important, I had received a strenuous introduction to the confusing and mazelike street patterns of the cities of Andalucía.

Ask Valencia what became of Murcia,
And where is Játiva, or where is Jaén?
Where is Córdoba, the seat of great learning,
And how many scholars of high repute remain there?
And where is Seville, the home of mirthful gatherings
On its great river, cooling and brimful with water?
These cities were the pillars of the country:

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ABOVE: THE COURT OF THE LONG POND IN THE GENERALIFE, AN EXTENSIVE MAZE OF GARDENS OUTSIDE THE ALHAMBRA. *OPPOSITE:* "LA GHALIB ILLA ALLAH," WHICH MEANS "THERE IS NO CONQUEROR BUT GOD," IS INSCRIBED ON WALLS THROUGHOUT THE ALHAMBRA.

Can a building remain when the pillars are missing?

So wrote the Arab Andalusian poet al-Rundi, lamenting the fall of Seville into the hands of the Christians in 1248. Andalucía today is the southernmost province of Spain, but for over 700 years it was known by its Arabic name, al-Andalus, and its cities were among the greatest in Europe.

By the time of al-Rundi's lament, Granada was the lone remaining Muslim outpost in al-Andalus, and the waning Islamic presence in Spain seemed destined for extinction. In fact, Granada survived for 144 more years, holding out until January 2, 1492, just ten months before Columbus first landed on the shores of the New World. The last to fall, Granada was the first stop on my tour of the major cities, or "pillars," of Andalucía.

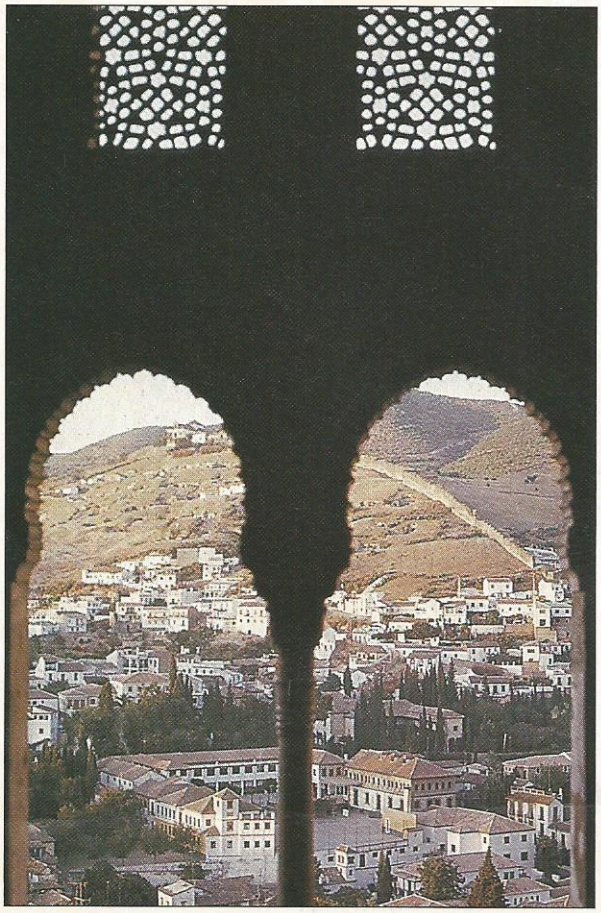
Although no part of Spain has been under Muslim rule for over 500 years, the legacy persists. Today, Spain celebrates, even glorifies, its Islamic heritage. This is particularly so in Granada, where the romanticizing of Islamic rule has brought the tourists in droves. I was one of them.

Recovered from my hiking fatigue, I walked around to the back of the San Nicolas church and came face to face with a fenced-in construction site. A sign written in both Spanish and Arabic proclaimed that a modern mosque was coming soon to this location. An expensive location, no doubt, with a panoramic view of the Alhambra. This mosque will serve the community of North African immigrants and "guest workers" who do indeed live in Granada and throughout Andalucía, but its location symbolizes something more, something about the past and the future and historic conti-

nuity. For Spain's growing Muslim population, Andalucía's Islamic past is not just an intriguing and exotic memory; it is not even past.

HOME TO THE ALHAMBRA

Granada was founded by a Berber general named Zawi ibn Ziri in the early eleventh century, and these first rulers came to be known as the Ziridians. But it was the Nasrids who built the Alhambra. The Nasrids came to Granada in 1236, after they were driven out of Zaragoza in northern Spain. By then, Spanish Islam was in retreat. To survive, the leaders of Granada had to pay tribute to and form alliances with their Christian enemies and were even compelled, humiliatingly, to assist in the Christian conquest of Seville in 1248. Islam was in its twilight, and Granada and the Alhambra came to represent the glorious sunset of Muslim rule in Spain.



GALYN C. HAMMOND

A VIEW OF GRANADA AND THE SURROUNDING HILLS FROM THE ALHAMBRA'S HALL OF THE AMBASSADORS, WHICH SERVED AS A RECEPTION HALL.

How hard it is for the daylight
To take its leave of Granada!
It entangles itself in the cypress
Or hides beneath the water.
—Federico García Lorca

It would be difficult to exaggerate the profound tranquillity that greeted me as I entered the first room of the Alhambra's Royal Palace. I was not struck by any sense of awe or intimidation. On the contrary, I felt very much at home. Constructed of wood, stucco, brick, and tile, the palace rooms are comfortable rather than formidable, and sturdy, monumental materials like stone and marble are noticeably absent. The Alhambra was not built to glorify dead rulers. It was built to be lived in.

For Granada, a city surrounded by foes and doomed ultimately to be conquered, the emphasis in the Alhambra on pleasantness and aesthetic beauty seems all the more remarkable. Instead of ponderous watchtowers and high, forbidding walls, you get intricately carved ceilings, lush gardens, and peaceful fountains. An air of defiant luxury permeates the entire complex.

"La ghalib illa Allah [There is no conqueror but God]" is inscribed on many of the walls (and T-shirts) of the Alhambra. This was the motto for the Muslim inhabitants of Granada, defenders of the last shrinking bastion of Islam in al-Andalus. It was a statement both defiant and humble. And despite the military conquest of 1492, there has been no conquest of the indomitable live-for-the-moment spirit so evident in the Alhambra. That spirit, in fact, still holds sway over the entire city.

Walking aimlessly through Granada, which I did as often as possible, I was amazed by the enormous number of shops and cafés. In this town, every open space seems to be surrounded by

restaurants and peopled with flower sellers, artists, and street musicians. There is even an impressive selection of outdoor cafés beneath the gloomy and imposing remains of the Ziridian walls. There is plenty of poverty in Granada, and there are many run-down areas that seem a thousand miles from polished and well-kept neighborhoods like the Albaicín. But in the right parts of town, the lively reality of Granada almost matches the romantic mood conjured up inside the walls and gardens of the Alhambra.

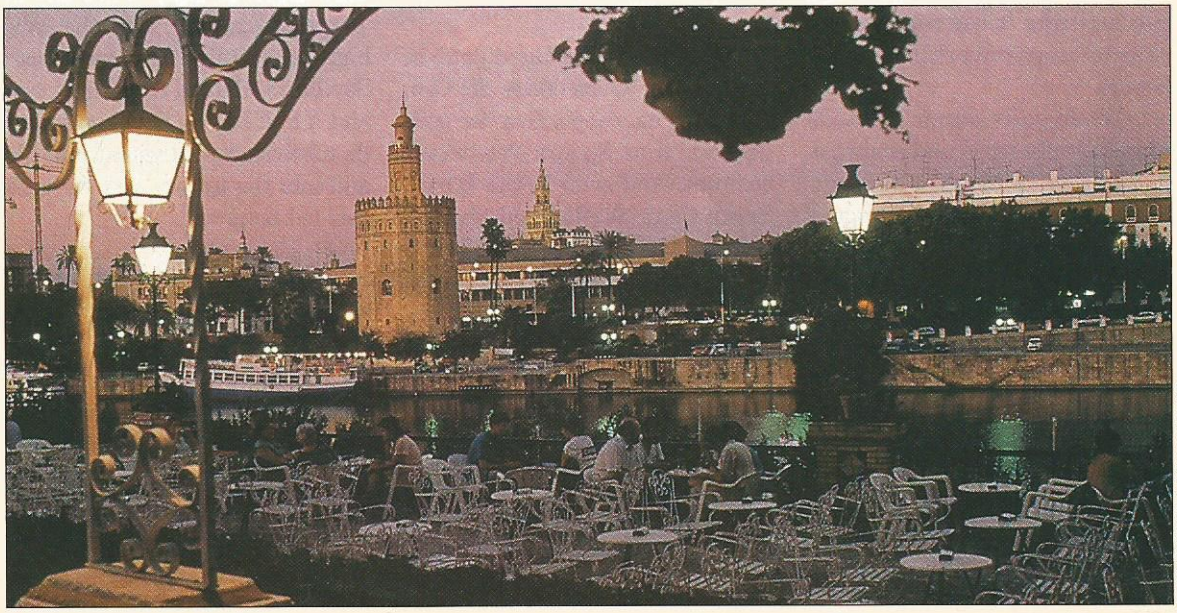
> When Islam was in its twilight, Granada and the Alhambra came to represent the glorious sunset of Muslim rule in Spain.

On to Seville

"For life is excusable only when we walk along the shores of pleasure and abandon all restraint!" Ibn Hamdis, the poet responsible for this line, did not come from Granada, where people have always been a little more laid back. He came from Seville. Indeed, al-Mu'tamid, the eleventh-century Arab king under whose patronage Ibn Hamdis served, was himself a poet, writing vainglorious verses about his conquests (both military and romantic) and then, after being dethroned by the puritanical Berber Almoravids, writing bitter poems from his lonely exile in the Atlas Mountains of southern Morocco.

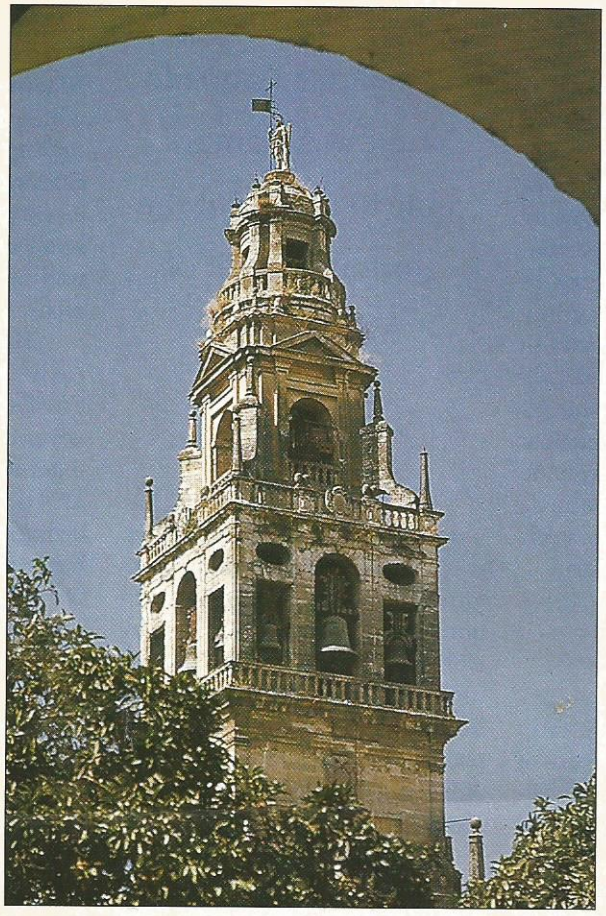
"Abandon all restraint" was a phrase certainly taken to heart by church officials of Seville in 1402 when they decided to build a new cathedral, "a building on so magnificent a scale that posterity will believe we were mad." The result, which took the entire fifteenth century to complete, is the largest Gothic cathedral (in cubic meters) on earth. It stands as a perfect example of the grandiose public display for which Seville is justly famous.

My first approach to the cathedral, the focal point of Seville's tourist life, took me by several outdoor cafés, crammed together and packed with diners and drinkers. My first order of business, however, was not to eat but to ascend to the summit of the Giralda, the bell tower of the cathedral and the city's signature monument. The Giralda was originally a minaret/watchtower associated with the city's chief mosque. Built in 1185 by the Almohads



LIFE IN SEVILLE CENTERS AROUND THE BANKS OF THE GUADALQUIVIR RIVER. THE TOWER IN THE BACKGROUND IS "LA TORRE DEL ORO," ONCE USED AS A REPOSITORY FOR GOLD ACQUIRED IN THE NEW WORLD.

COURTESY THE TOURIST OFFICE OF SPAIN


GALYN C. HAMMOND

SEVILLE'S GIRALDA, BUILT IN 1185 AS A MINARET, WAS CONVERTED TO A BELL TOWER BY CONQUERING CHRISTIANS.

(who succeeded the Almoravids in Seville), the Giralda was converted into a bell tower by the conquering Christians. At the top, I negotiated and jockeyed for position with the rest of the tourists, rewarded by views of the massive cathedral, the bright white city, and the wide Guadalquivir River.

There is, of course, a story, or perhaps a legend, that accompanies the Giralda. In 1248, as negotiations over the imminent Christian conquest of Seville proceeded, the defeated Muslims let it be known that they planned to dismantle their towering minaret before they left. Alfonso, the Spanish general in charge of the conquest, responded that if even one brick was removed, he would decapitate everyone in the city! Is this story true? Who knows. But the attitude it conveys, one of characteristic overkill, is pure Seville.

While post-Islamic Granada gracefully absorbed and eventually glorified its Muslim heritage, Seville suffered no such pangs of nostalgia. Islamic landmarks, such as the Giralda, that did survive were aggressively put to use by Spain and the church. In addition to the cathedral, several other churches sport bell towers made from minarets. An Almohad tower on the banks of the Guadalquivir, now known as the Torre del Oro, was used as a repository for gold acquired from Spain's New World colonies. And even in the Barrio Santa Cruz, Seville's old Muslim quarter, the high, white walls are peppered with shrines.

I sat in the Patio de las Doncellas of Seville's Alcázar, the seat of power for the city's rulers since the time of the Romans. This airy courtyard was lavishly decorated for the city's Christian conquerors by Muslim craftsmen imported from Granada. Less delicate and domestic than the rooms at the Alhambra, this patio was nonetheless an inspiring space, and I enjoyed soaking in its ambience. A small American group sat near me, and one of them remarked, utterly without tact, "This place is a rip!"

I didn't agree, but I knew what he meant. Aside from this room and a few side rooms, the Alcázar featured little of the "Moorish" influence. It was an unconnected hodgepodge of rooms from virtually all periods and styles, from the twelfth-century Almohad walls to nineteenth-century restorations. But that is Seville. Here, the past is merely a foundation on which an ever more glorious future might be built. It is a city in perpetual motion. Like the AVE high-speed train that sprints from Seville to Madrid in a scant two and a half hours, Sevillanos hurl themselves unrestrained into life and into the future, and the past gets left behind.

ANDALUCIA'S CAPITAL

On the Guadalquivir River, upstream from Seville, rests the city of Córdoba. The AVE makes a

stop in Córdoba but doesn't linger, its sleek modern design seeming somehow out of place in this ancient town. In reality, Córdoba is no older than Seville, but it seems older, the air heavy with nostalgia. Old Arab mills still stand in the placid waters of the Guadalquivir. A low, arched Roman bridge still carries traffic back and forth across the river. And the Great Mosque, dingy and gray on the outside, is still the center of activity.

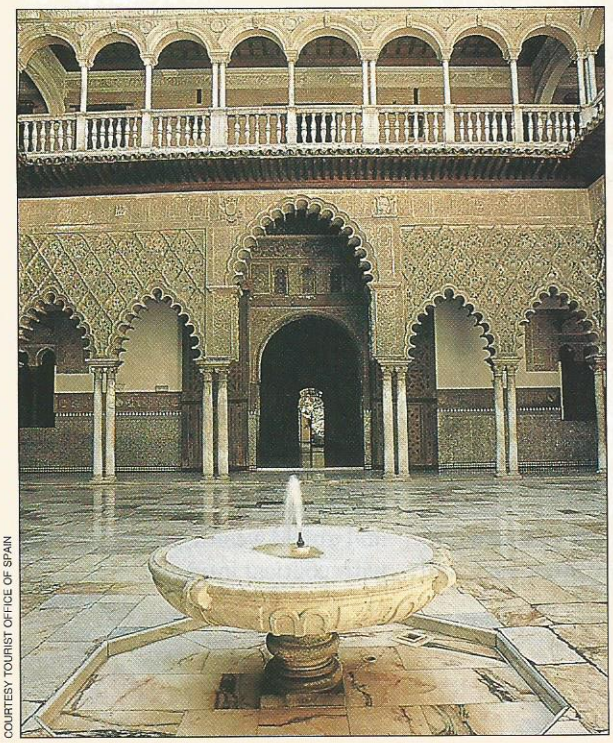
A thousand years ago, Córdoba was perhaps the greatest city in Europe. As a center of material wealth and scholarship, it was unrivaled. Its rulers, the 'Umayyads, assumed the title of caliph, claiming, somewhat fancifully, dominion over the entire Islamic world. As distant relations to the Prophet Muhammad, they had held this power legitimately in Damascus but were displaced in 750 by another set of the Prophet's relatives, the 'Abbasids. Fleeing to al-Andalus, the 'Umayyads set up shop in Córdoba, bringing the whole of Islamic Spain under their rule and creating in Córdoba a serious rival to the 'Abbasids' new and flowering capital of Baghdad.

They also created the Great Mosque, one of the most revered works of religious architecture in the world. In Spain, the mosque is called La Mezquita Catedral, for, like all mosques, it was converted into a cathedral when the Christians conquered the city in 1236. But such was the spiritual power of this building that nearly three hundred years passed before Córdoba's Christian leaders dared to tamper with its fundamentally Islamic design.

In 1523, a walled-in choir area, or *coro*, with a proto-Baroque high altar, was planted in the middle of the mosque. From planning stages to completion, the townspeople of Córdoba objected strenuously to this desecration of their revered landmark. Even Charles V, the Hapsburg monarch who left his heavy-handed and incongruous marks all over Spain and who approved this particular renovation, was repulsed by the result when he saw it. "You have destroyed what was unique in the world," the king is reported to have said, rebuking the hapless local bishop.

Today, the airy, minimalist

BELOW LEFT: THE PATIO DE LAS DONCELLAS IN SEVILLE'S ALCAZAR WAS THE SEAT OF POWER FOR THE CITY'S RULERS FROM ROMAN TIMES UNTIL THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY. *BELOW RIGHT:* IN SEVILLE'S BARRIO SANTA CRUZ, THE OLD MUSLIM QUARTER, THE HIGH, WHITE WALLS ARE NOW PEPPERED WITH CATHOLIC SHRINES.



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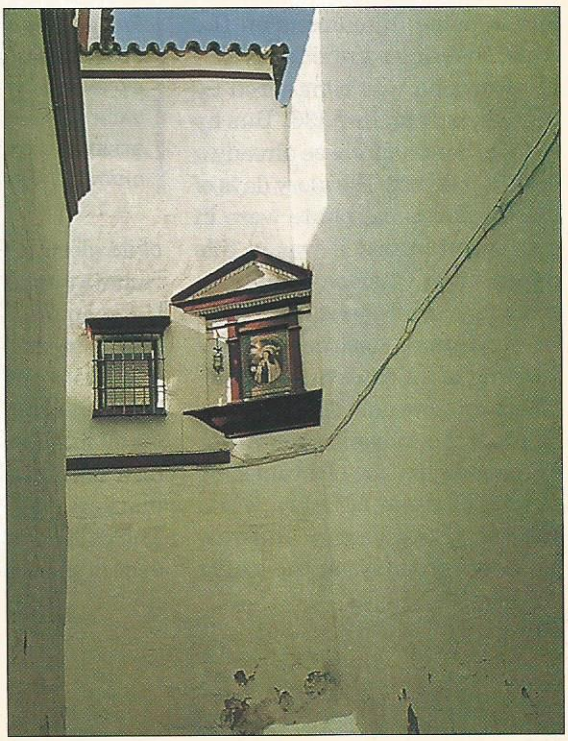

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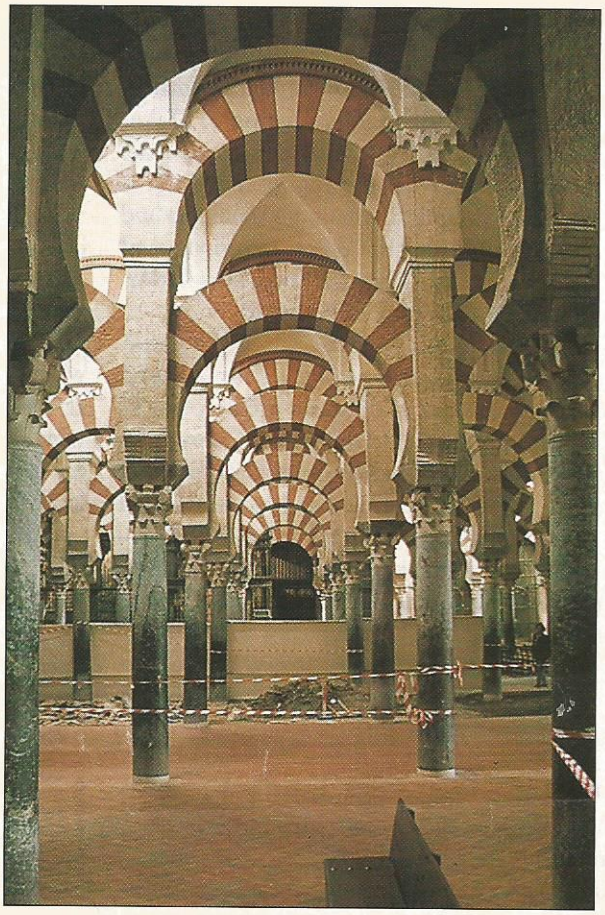
harmony of the Great Mosque is indeed disrupted by the presence of the coro, but the busloads of tour groups, diligently taking flash pictures no matter how many times they are told not to, don't help. Still, the contemplative power of pillars and arches, stretching symmetrically into the distance and in all directions, is undeniable. I found walking from the mosque into the coro, and back into the mosque again to be a fascinating study in contrasts. In particular, the Islamic focus on the abstract harmony of the building itself, the columns, arches, and empty spaces, clashed jarringly with the Christian depiction of human forms, some, like Jesus on the cross, suffering painful tortures.



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THE PILLARS AND ARCHES OF CÓRDOBA'S GREAT MOSQUE, WHICH EXPANDED WITH THE ADDITIONS OF EACH SUCCESSIVE MUSLIM RULER, STRETCH SYMMETRICALLY INTO THE DISTANCE AND IN ALL DIRECTIONS.

Córdoba was conquered by the Christians in 1236. But by then its dominance was already a distant memory. The glory days of the Córdoban caliphate were in the tenth century. It was in this century that Córdoba simultaneously reached its peak and began its precipitous decline with the building of an extravagant royal palace complex called Madinat al-Zahra. If the Alhambra represented the serene vision of a vanishing people, Madinat al-Zahra was a symbol of the vanity and raw power of an empire at the height of its glory. It was a tribute to the runaway ego of its founder, Abd al-Rahman III. Construction, which began in the year 936, involved ten thousand workmen. Once completed, Madinat al-Zahra was for all intents and purposes a new city, featuring mosques, baths, markets, and residential areas. The palace complex included gardens, a menagerie, an aviary, and fishponds. Not surprisingly, this new city proved very expensive to maintain. Twelve thousand loaves of bread a day were required, and that was just for the fish!

It is no accident that the Alhambra still stands, while Madinat al-Zahra was enthusiastically destroyed only seventy-five years after its construction. Aside from its decadent opulence, Madinat al-Zahra was too far removed from Córdoba. Isolated several miles outside of their capital, the rulers in Madinat al-Zahra were unable to defend themselves against the usurpations that eventually proved to be their undoing.

Still relatively isolated, Madinat al-Zahra is not easy to get to without a car. I took the bus, packed in with smartly uniformed schoolchildren heading back to class after their midday break. I got off at Azahara, maybe three miles outside of Córdoba. The remaining walk was, supposedly, a mere three kilometers, and the setting was pleasantly rural. Cow pastures, olive groves, and the green hills of the Sierra Morena provided the scenery. These pastoral surroundings must have been quite different a thousand years ago, bustling with commerce and untold wealth, and simmering with political intrigue.

Eventually, I managed to hitch a ride. This was fortunate: The alleged three-kilometer hike also included some steep hills as the road climbed up into the Sierra Morena. The man who drove me to the site also sold me my ticket. (The few other visitors, all of whom held EC passports, got in for free.) He explained the various parts of the unearthed city to me, and I was soon on my way, virtually by myself, out in the countryside walking among the ruins of one of the most splendid and short-lived cities in history.

Only in this century have attempts been made to reconstruct Madinat al-Zahra. In the intervening centuries, it has been much plundered and cannibalized.

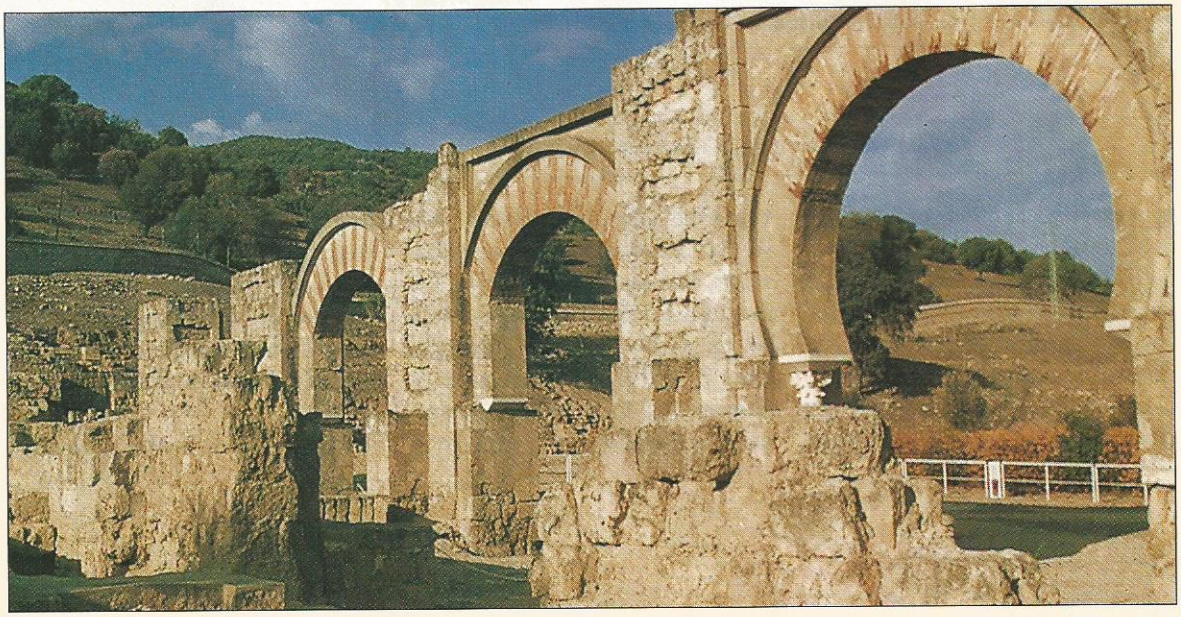
OUTSIDE CÓRDOBA LIE THE RUINS OF MADINAT AL-ZAHRA. BUILT BY ABD AL-RAHMAN III IN 936, THE CITY WAS ONLY INHABITED SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS BEFORE ITS DESTRUCTION DURING A CIVIL WAR THAT BROUGHT AN END TO CÓRDOBA'S DOMINANCE IN AL-ANDALUS.

If the Alhambra represented the serene vision of a vanishing people, Madinat al-Zahra was a symbol of vanity and power.

Yet evidence of its former splendor can be seen today in the parts of the city that have been excavated, including the mosque, the House of the Viziers, the Royal Palace, and the wildly decorated Hall of Abd al-Rahman III. The vinelike embellishments in this hall, neither symmetrical nor abstract as is traditional in Islam, come as quite a shock. This shock may have been the last straw for an army of religiously orthodox Berber mercenaries who in 1010, seething from years of discrimination at the hands of ostentatiously wealthy Arab rulers, reduced Madinat al-Zahra to rubble.

The destruction of Madinat al-Zahra and the Córdoban caliphate ushered in an era of civil war and a regionalism that has periodically resurfaced throughout much of Spanish history. This, as much as the romantic castles and intriguing stories, is a legacy of Islamic Spain. Back in Córdoba, I saw the words "Liberación Andaluza" and "Al-Andalus Libre" scrawled on a wall beneath the parked tour buses, accompanied by a revealing logo. The letters *LA* were enclosed within an eight-pointed star, the single most important symbol in the art of Islamic Spain. The ties that bind Andalucía to its Islamic past continue to crop up in surprising ways. ■

Brian Evans works with Middle Eastern books at the University of Texas library and frequently travels to Europe and the Middle East. He has a master's degree in Middle East studies.



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