



Flamenco dancers perform with dramatic flair at El Patio Sevillano.

Olé!

Seville is the heart and soul of southern Spain

BY LAUREN BAUMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY LAUREN AND LARRY BAUMAN

As the lights dim, the flamenco performance begins on the small stage of El Patio Sevillano. Accompanied by three guitarists, six costumed dancers start moving – stamping with special, metal-embedded shoes and raising their arms vigorously. Some dancers click castanets in rhythmic precision while two other men clap and sing, alternating between melancholy wailing and joyful cries.

With dramatic flair, the male dancers, wearing tight pants, neck scarves and vests, act out stories of seduction, love and

betrayal with the women, whose bright, ruffled gowns sway around them, their dark hair pulled into buns. The complex footwork and physicality of the performances are impressive.

And, yes, they repeatedly shout, “Olé!” It’s an exclamation of encouragement or approval.

The mixed crowd of tourists and locals cheers loudly, returning the Olés with gusto – a glimpse into the unrestrained, triumphant spirit of the Andalusian people, hard-fought over centuries of turbulent history. I’m soon drawn into the soulful passion of this traditional music and dance, but perhaps the Spanish wine helps, too.



Flamenco comes from a mosaic of ancient sources, including Roman, Arabic and Jewish influences, but its current distinctive form evolved in the late 18th and 19th centuries in Seville – its heartland. So I couldn’t miss seeing a live show at an authentic venue while visiting this city in southern Spain.

My husband and I were on a 15-day bus tour that travelled southward from the central Castile-La Mancha region to Seville (or Sevilla in Spanish), the fourth largest city in Spain with about 695,000 people. The roadways were lined with flowering oleander shrubs, sentinel-like rows of olive trees, sunflower-dotted fields – a welcome change of pace after the frenzy of Madrid, about a five-hour drive away.

Seville is a riverfront city with many picturesque and historically significant plazas, palaces, bridges, churches and other sites.

It is not only the birthplace of modern flamenco, but also the vibrant capital city of the eight provinces that make up the southern region of Andalusia – uniquely located between two continents (Europe and Africa) and two seas (the Atlantic and Mediterranean), separated by the Strait of Gibraltar. Not far from Seville lie such geographical contrasts as tropical coastlines, jagged mountain ranges and lush natural parks.

Andalusia is blessed with a subtropical Mediterranean climate with mild winters, hot summers and perennial blue skies. Spring-time is perfect, and warm, dry and sunny days greeted our late-May travels.

The 657-kilometre-long Guadalquivir River winds across Andalusia, its lower valley finally passing through Seville en route to the Atlantic. After Christopher Columbus sailed from a neighbouring port in 1492, Seville became the Gateway to America, flourishing as the base of trade for the New World for several centuries and shaping a mixture of cultures that still define the city.

However, our first taste of Seville was an



Plaza de España

ultra-modern hotel with a dramatic spiral staircase in its lobby and an appealing outdoor swimming pool where we cooled off after each day's trek. At a huge department store complex nearby, we stocked up on beverages, munchies and delicious homegrown olives.

Spain is actually the world's leading olive-oil producer and exporter, of which Andalusia accounts for 75 per cent. Indeed, our first night in Seville we dined at a rustic Mediterranean/Italian grill featuring olive-oil-based dishes. Our wine was from one of Andalusia's vast vineyards.

The next day, we headed out to discover more about why Seville is the cultural heart of southern Spain and a showcase for some of the country's grandest and oldest architecture.

Our first stop was Maria Luisa Park, the site of the 1929 Latin-American Exposition, which transformed the host city of Seville. Next to the park is the Plaza de España, designed by architect Anibal Gonzalez as the centrepiece of the world fair. The plaza complex can only be described as funky – a mix of art deco and Moorish revival architecture. In front of a semi-circular brick building with towers at each end is a Venice-like canal crossed by four ornate bridges to the huge plaza itself. Horse-drawn carriages pass by a central fountain and, in the midst of it all, a tuxedo-clad pianist with a white piano entertains the tourists.

Facing the canal are 48 alcoves with benches, each representing a province of Spain with relevant tableaus. Brightly painted ceramic tiles are featured in the alcoves, and along the many balconies, balustrades, bridges and walls of the over-the-top plaza. Its main building now houses government offices, but other Expo pavilions have been converted into museums.

Next, we headed to the historic centre of Seville. Beginning in Barrio Santa Cruz,

improbably narrow, cobbled passageways snake past whitewashed houses and tapas bars in small squares lined with orange trees. This charming, old neighbourhood is actually the former Jewish Quarter. It's hard to imagine the violent persecution of Jews there in the 14th century by the Christians who had first lived harmoniously with the Jewish community before the expulsion and conversion of synagogues into churches.

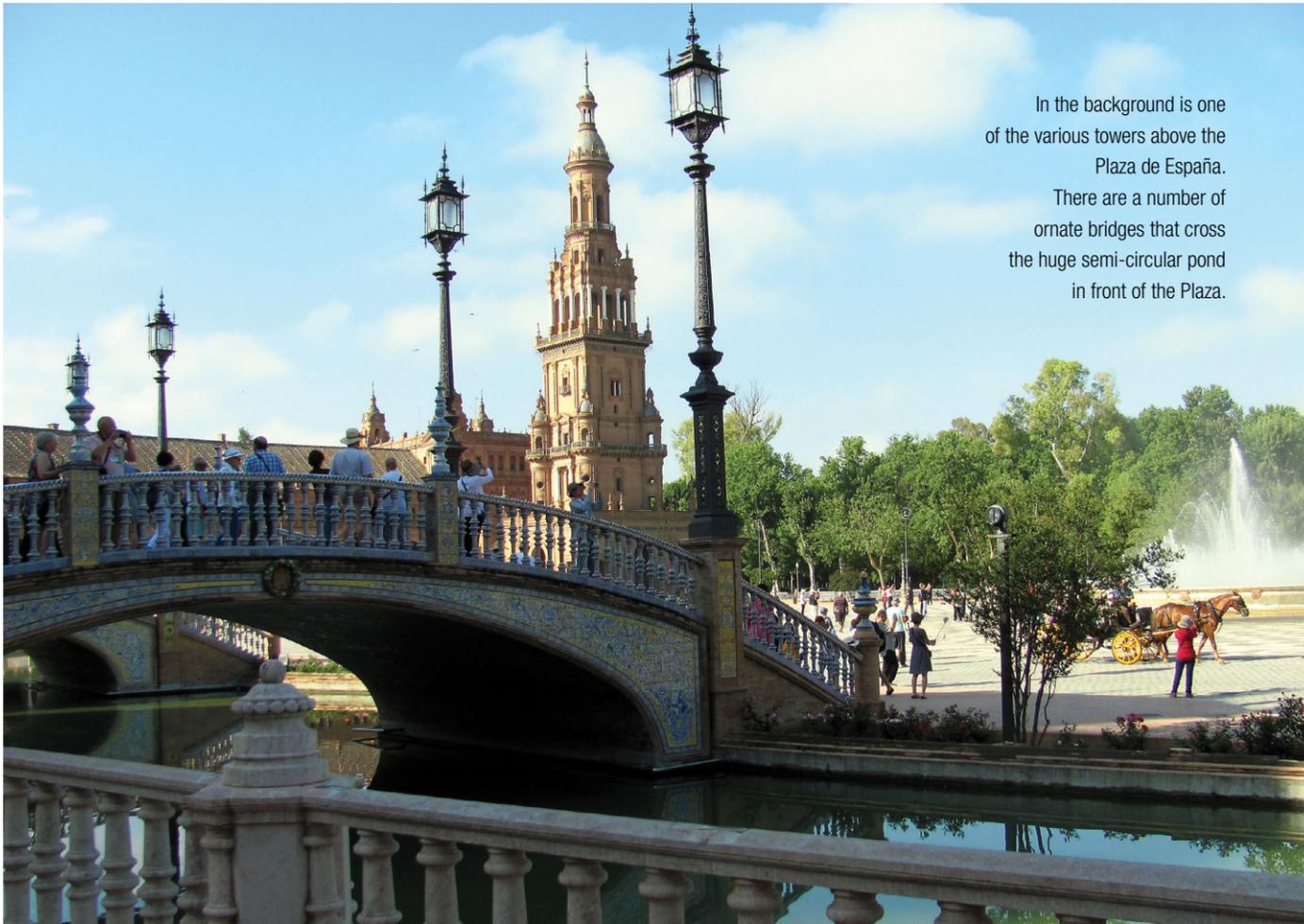
The monumental complex of the Real Alcázar, or Royal Palace, is the largest and oldest palace-fortress in Spain and designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's hard to absorb the facts presented during a lengthy guided tour when at every turn something mesmerizing catches your attention or camera finger.

Dating to 700, the Alcázar was the residence of Moorish chiefs and then expanded in the 11th century by Almohad rulers from North Africa who dominated the Iberian Peninsula, the southwest region of Europe. The many palaces and patios, as well as their walled perimeters, are relatively intact.

Notably, the Patio of the Maidens illustrates simple Mudéjar architecture, with fine columns and arches facing onto a long reflective pool, an Islamic symbol of purity. Ancient decorated tiles and stuccoed Arabesque work are also preserved throughout. Interestingly, no human or animal figures were incorporated into the intricate designs for spiritual reasons.

After the Christian conquest by King Ferdinand III in 1248, the Alcázar complex became home to a succession of Spanish monarchs well into the 16th century. They transformed the austere Muslim buildings into splendid palaces with sumptuous apartments, salons and courtyards, all connecting like a giant labyrinth. In fact, Columbus signed a contract there with Queen Isabella, who sponsored his first voyage to America.

Most impressive is the extravagantly decorated Ambassador's Room, once used



In the background is one of the various towers above the Plaza de España. There are a number of ornate bridges that cross the huge semi-circular pond in front of the Plaza.



El Alcázar

for affairs of state by the kings. Above you is a magnificent dome, shaped like a bronzed orange half. This cupola is made of elaborate, cedar-wood carvings and geometric patterns – stars, circles and other shapes – symbolizing the heavens.

The Game of Thrones series has used the palace as a shooting location.

Not only a compelling architectural and cultural fusion, the Alcázar is also surrounded by a vast diversity of gardens, from fruit orchards that fed its residents to esthetically pleasing garden designs – Italian, English, French – added in different centuries. Fountains, pavilions, statues and pools are sprinkled throughout the manicured mazes of lush greenery and cascading pink and purple flowers. The best view of the Italian Renaissance Gardens is from the Grotto Gallery, a balcony walkway built from the old Muslim walls.

A stone's throw away from the Alcázar

is another deserving UNESCO World Heritage site – the magnificent Cathedral of Seville, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, which was also converted from an 11th-century mosque after the Christian conquest. One of its popular attractions is the monument and tomb of Christopher Columbus.

The day of our visit, the Roman Catholic cathedral was temporarily closed due to the Holy Feast of St. Ferdinand, the patron saint of Seville and Andalusian hero who died on that day, May 30, and is also buried in the cathedral. Throngs gathered in the plaza for a parade and procession by a military band, amid tight security. We got close enough for a taste of one of Seville's many traditional festivals. Apparently during the lavish Easter Week celebrations, enormous floats are carried through the streets by teams, followed by hundreds of penitents singing sacred songs in the

TIME AND TRAVEL

Time zone: Previous governments have put Spain in the “wrong time zone” by following Central European Summer Times, rather than the Western European ones of its actual geographical location in line with Great Britain and Portugal. Consequently, the sun rises and sets one hour later, which suits the lifestyles of Spaniards who prefer to work later and break mid-day, eating their main meals at lunchtime, which goes until about 5 p.m. Then dinner usually starts at 9 to 10 p.m., when locals sit for hours in outdoor cafes or bars, savouring plates of shared tapas.

Transportation: You can fly directly into Seville San Pablo, a modern airport. As well, Spain has an extensive network of high-speed trains, connecting Seville and Madrid in about two and a half hours, or Seville to many other Andalusian cities, including Cordoba and Malaga on the Sunshine Coast.

flamenco style. The floats, depicting the Easter story, are actually religious art works from past centuries.

The cathedral's crowning glory is the 104-metre-high Giralda. Originally the ancient minaret of the Almohad mosque, the bell tower was built higher and completed by 1198, but when an earthquake destroyed its upper spheres in 1365, a sculpted bronze figure was added. Known as the Giraldilo, this weathervane gave the tower its name of La Giralda.

This striking landmark made it easier to find our way along the network of streets leading from the cathedral to the river nearby.

Exploring the open-air walkways and parks along the Guadalquivir River is a refreshing change of pace after the near-claustrophobic streets.

Eight distinctive bridges cross the river,

linking pedestrians and traffic to various districts. The Isabella II Bridge, with its three cast-iron arches, stands out as the oldest iron bridge in Spain, inaugurated in 1852 and later declared a National Historic Monument. White canopies span the more modern Cachorro Bridge, sheltering fellow walkers from the sun.

We browsed in tiny artisan shops selling an abundance of colourful wares, including shawls, embroidery, leathers, sculptures and mini flamenco dresses. Seville has a thriving craft industry, led by ceramics and pottery makers, using ancient techniques, as do the many goldsmiths and silversmiths. Thankfully, most shopkeepers don't pressure customers, letting their goods be carefully admired before selling themselves.

Tucked between shops, like canned sardines, are small eateries. We sat outside on rickety chairs for cold beers and cured ham sandwiches; the meat was sliced right off the side of a dried pig. The best jamón serrano (literally from the mountains) is said to come from Andalusia. Quite true.

On our final night in Seville, we walked to an unpretentious cafeteria for a dinner of locally sourced Andalusian cuisine – gazpacho, flamenquín (fried veal, ham, and cheese rolls), and fresh, pan-fried hake with oniony potatoes. It was still light at 10 p.m. and warm enough to sit outside where taxis and motorcycles occasionally whizzed by perilously close.

Reluctant to leave, we slowly sipped our wine. The waiter appeared with complimentary cookies and glasses of sweet sherry, another Andalusian specialty. He stopped to chat, despite his imperfect English; not for the first time, we were struck by the friendliness of the local Sevillanos.

Seville is bursting with other monuments, nooks and crannies – too numerous to mention. A few days are barely enough, but our tour itinerary included other cities of southern Spain before heading to Barcelona on the north Mediterranean coast.

To sum up the diverse majesty of Seville – the heart and soul of Andalusian Spain – I would use a grand, sweeping gesture and simply say, “Olé!” one more time. 🇪🇸

BIG STYLE

SPANNER
ROCKPORT
SAMSONITE
TRENDS FOR MEN
TOOTSIES
SKECHERS
ROYAL DOULTON
LEVI'S OUTLET
RED CORAL
NATURALIZER
COUNTRY BLUE
VIVAH JEWELRY



BIG SAVINGS



TOY BUILDING ZONE
PADERNO
LAURA
CORNINGWARE
OXFORD MILLS
BABY'S ROOM
OLDE TYME KETTLE
COTTON WAVE
NORTHERN REFLECTIONS
WATERLOO CENTRAL RAILWAY

St. Jacobs Outlets



Outlets & stores open daily; weeknights to 9 pm
25 Benjamin Rd., Waterloo. Open holidays

StJacobsOutlets.com