

Southward Bound in SPAIN



“ Legend has it that the Sultan would look upon his harem from this balcony to that courtyard below. He would throw an apple down to the concubine he wanted to spend the night with. Makes you wonder what happened if the concubines all ran away from the apple! ”

SOUTHBOUND TO THE ALBAYZIN

According to our guide at the Alhambra, a grand palace with Islamic roots located in the south of Spain, the legend was one among many chronicled by American author Washington Irving (who wrote *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and who first described New York City as “Gotham”, which was famously adopted later on by DC comics).

My husband and I had driven south from Madrid to the city of Granada, located in the Spanish province of Andalusia. We’d passed through arid, rocky terrain as we neared the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The landscape attested to the one-liner from *My Fair Lady*: that it really doesn’t rain in Spain. Up to that point, the weather we experienced had been near freezing yet sunny, with a humidity of what felt like 0%.

We stayed in the Albayzin, a medieval neighbourhood of narrow crooked alleys paved with cobblestone, all of which begged to be explored. The morning after our arrival, we awoke to unusual British-like weather — the

sky was overcast and drizzling. Still, that didn’t stop two intrepid tourists from trudging through the medieval streets. We peered at the old Spanish houses, hugged the looming alley walls when cars zoomed by and watched the locals expertly navigate the uneven and slippery pavement, all while avoiding the innumerable piles of dog excrement along the way. Yes, despite being a UNESCO World Heritage Site, dogs are, for some reason, allowed to use any part of the cobbled walkways as their toilets. And there were *many* dogs.

We arrived at Saint Nicholas Church, atop the Albayzin, just as the locals were dropping off their kids at school, before most tourists had risen from bed. There, we caught a magnificent panoramic view of the Alhambra perched on its hilltop eagle’s nest.

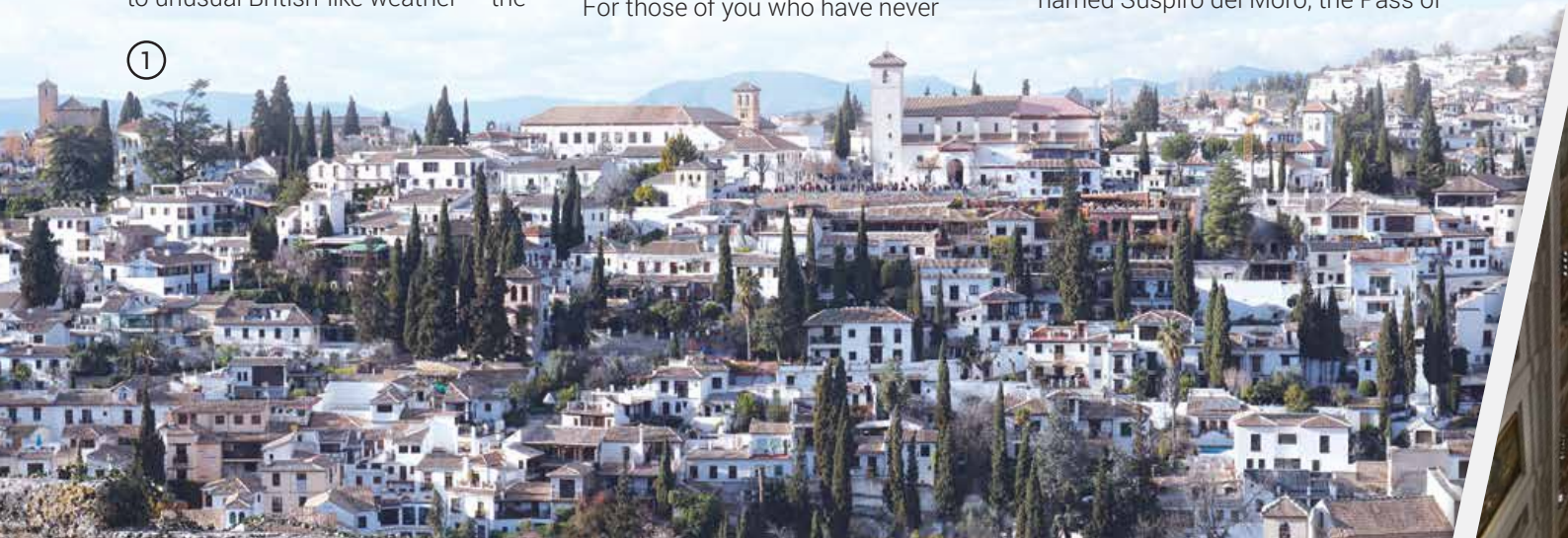
SACROMONTE EXPLORATION ON WHEELS

Later, after the Spanish sun had burned off the gloomy clouds, we set out on a two-hour Segway tour of the Sacromonte, another neighbourhood with a rich history. For those of you who have never

been on a Segway, you have to try it! The sensitive gyroscope on the device means that even someone like me (with my higher-than-average fall risk) can ride safely and have fun. Our guide, a bubbly Italian señorita with bright pink hair, took us up the steep slopes of the Sacromonte to the gypsy quarter. This is where the Romani people still live, having built their homes out of caves. From the top of the Sacromonte, we took in a sprawling view of the lush valley extending towards the Sierra Nevada mountain range, a fertile paradise compared to the parched, desert-like plains further away.

The Alhambra stood to our left, the Albayzin borough to our right, and the valley ran behind us. As she wheeled about on her Segway, our spritely guide told us this tale: In 1492, the last king of the Nasrid dynasty was exiled by King Ferdinand of the Castilians. Boabdil, as he was known, paused at a mountain pass and turned to cast one final look at the kingdom he was surrendering to the Christians. Upon seeing the mighty Alhambra, a legacy of his ancestors, he wept, and the place was thereafter named Suspiro del Moro, the Pass of

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the Moor's Sigh. Even more famous was what his mother said to him then: "Do not weep like a woman for what you could not defend as a man."

Ouch. Tough love.

Our day in Granada rounded off with a tour of the Alhambra itself. This fortress holds numerous gardens and palaces that preserve Islamic art and architecture unique to the Nasrid dynasty. It was on this three-hour walking tour that we heard about the Sultan's apple and his concubines, saw remarkable examples of the intricate marble patterns carved into the palace walls and caught a bird's eye view of the entire city at sunset. Our guide at the palace was a local with a penchant for plants. He could name almost every tree and flower growing within the palace, and expressed his gratitude for Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*. This book piqued European and American interest in the Alhambra in the 19th century. Without that, our guide declared, the Alhambra would have fallen into ruin and not become the historical monument that it is today.

ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE OF TOLEDO

The next stop on our Spanish tour took us to the ancient Roman city of Toledo, another UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its steel, as every souvenir shop selling swords and armour in the city declared. The historical part of the city was very much like Granada's Albayzin in appearance, sans dog fertiliser — which I was grateful for. It made for less treacherous hiking and exploring.

Our short time in Toledo allowed us to see two of the city's attractions: the Gothic Primate Cathedral of Saint

Mary of Toledo and the Synagogue of El Transito.

Nestled in the heart of Toledo, the Cathedral is a grand example of Gothic and Renaissance art, with high arches and thick columns, beautiful murals and exquisite ceiling paintings. In contrast, the Synagogue appeared almost understated in size and grandeur. However, this centuries-old building located in the old Jewish Quarter, is a good reminder that while the Muslims and Christians dominated most of Spanish history, the Sephardi Jews were present and made their contributions as well.

TRUE BLUE SPANISH FARE

Now, a trip to Spain isn't complete without mentioning the local food. I've concluded that the Spaniards, like Singaporeans, know how to eat a variety of foods, prepared in a myriad of ways. Paella, akin to Spanish seafood fried rice, is a famous item every visitor should have. Ceviche, a raw fish dish cured with lemon juice, is a tasty treat for those who enjoy sashimi. Jamón (cured ham) and various Spanish sausages are a must-have for meat lovers. And let's not forget the wine. At two to four euros a glass, one might argue that food in Spain tastes so good because it can easily be washed down with sufficient quantities of alcohol.

Washington Irving wrote this of the Alhambra: "How unworthy is my scribbling of the place." Suffice to say, our trip to Granada and Toledo showed us that Spain is a country rich in history and culture. This article alone would not do justice to the beauty and historicity of the sites we visited. Therefore, best to see for yourself. And for the more adventurous ones, see it on a Segway. ♦

PROFILE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

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Tina went to Spain to attend a conference. Along the way, she found time to savour Spanish food and enjoyed a week-long respite from the intense Singapore heat. She learned a few Spanish words along the way, but promptly forgot most of them due to the lack of Spaniards back at home, except the ones relating to food. Those are worth remembering.

Legend

1. View of the Albayzin taken from the Alhambra
2. Artwork on the ceiling of the Gothic cathedral in Toledo
3. Seafood paella dish with a jug of (almost empty) Sangria; Sangria is an alcoholic beverage and its name can only be used in Spain and Portugal
4. Ceviche, a raw fish dish
5. Proof that I went on a Segway

