

Córdoba



Getting There

From Carmona take the E-5/A-4 eastwards directly to Córdoba - a trip of about 108 kms.

History

In Andalucía, where many cities have a long and varied history, Córdoba's is one of the most ancient. Its strategic position alongside the Guadalquivir river, and the resulting fertile land of the area known as the Campiña, made it an ideal location and the first settlement here was made in the late Bronze Age in the 8th/9th century BC. In that era the river was still navigable as far as the present day city, and the Phoenicians and Greeks found there way here to establish it as a mining and commercial base.

By the early 3rd Century BC it was invaded by the Romans who, in 152 BC, founded Corduba and designated it capital of the Roman Province of Hispania Ulterior. The Romans, though, fought amongst themselves and although Pompeii conquered the city in 45 BC Augustus Ceasar re-took it establishing again the Imperial system and giving back its status and position of Patrician Colony. This brought a period of affluence with many new and impressive civic structures and temples etc. – some of which can still be seen to this day.

Unfortunately, after *Hispalis Sevilla* was designated the provincial capital, and while the Roman era was drawing to a close, Córdoba's influence and economic power declined. This continued past 572 when, after nearly eight centuries of Roman rule, the Visigoth king, Leovigildus, took control of Córdoba. This period was short lived, however, and in 711 the Moors, crossing from Africa, wrested control of the city in their sweep through the Iberian Peninsula. This proved to be the beginning of three centuries of glittering splendor for this city.

Córdoba was initially captured by a deputy of Tariq, and was made an administrative capital where the two peoples lived harmoniously side-by-side. It was during this era that work began, on the foundations of the Visigothic Basilica of San Vicente, for what would later

become the Great Mosque. However, by their nature, the conquerors were tribal by nature and it wasn't until 756 when Abdel-Rahman I, Emir of the Ommiad dynasty, established Córdoba as an independent emirate.

Thirty years later construction began on the first major enlargement of the Great Mosque, a journey to which is said to have been comparable to a pilgrimage to Mecca.

With its elevation, by Abdel-Rahman III in 929, to the status of Caliphate, the city entered its most important era as it became the administrative, religious and political centre of the total Islamic kingdom in the west of Europe. Not only that, but it was considered to be one of the cultural capitals of the world; a respected center of science and art. Córdoba had the first university in Europe, the first street lighting in Europe, and boasted a library with over 400,000 volumes. In short, it was second in influence, wealth and culture only to Constantinople. It was this era, too, that saw the construction of the magnificent city of Madinat Al-Zahra, to the west of the city. These days of power came to an end, however, when rebellion by the Omayyad Prince Muhammad II in 1009 resulted in the breakup of the Caliphate into separate Moorish kingdoms, precipitating a long decline in the city's fortunes.

By the time Córdoba was reconquered in 1236 by the Castilian/Leónese king, Ferdinand III, known as "The Saint", the city was already in ruins. During the ensuing years it was repopulated by Christians – many from the north of Spain. Ferdinand also was responsible for the creation of 11 new churches in the town, which became known as the Fernandine Churches in his honour.

The tourist authorities in Córdoba have arranged a tour of these churches, that were commissioned by Ferdinand III – The Saint, called the **Fernandina Route**. There are three routes through the Axerquia section of town, with an audio-guide service and MP3 players available in some churches. The hours are quite complicated and tickets, with entrances valid for three days, cost €4 are available at any of the Tourist Information Points, or online.

The 14th century was, generally, not good for Córdoba as it was hit by two occurrences of Black Death and a Civil War between Pedro I – The Cruel and Enrique de Trastámara – his bastard brother. However, in 1382 Alfonso XI ordered construction of the Alcázar, which Queen Isabella made her residence towards the end of the 15th century. And it was here that she received Christopher Columbus prior to one of his voyages to the New World and from here, also, that she planned the reconquest of Granada. Her grandson, Carlos V, initiated the construction of the city's Christian Cathedral. Oddly enough, he decreed it should be built in the center of the great Mosque; thus creating, by design or

accident, one of the world's most incongruous mixtures of architecture and culture.

The following centuries passed rather inconsequentially - although many impressive Baroque structures were erected, but the city suffered during the French occupation at the beginning of the 19th century and the following period of Carlist rule.

It wasn't until the middle of the 20th century that the city began to recover its importance, which was enhanced by the founding of the University. Its historical importance, too, began to be recognized, especially as the historic quarter was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

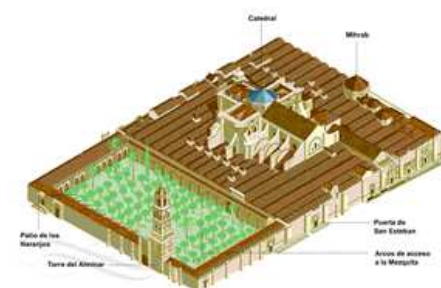
These days Córdoba is, for the most part, a quiet provincial capital. And, strangely, given its combination of history, fascinating monuments and evident charm, it is often overlooked by tourists who are more familiar with the attractions of its neighbours, Sevilla and Granada. To do so, though, is a mistake.



Places of Interest

Mezquita/Cathedral La Mezquita/Catedral

The most dominant feature is the bell tower, Torre del Alminar, topped by a statue of San Rafael, which has its origins in the construction of a 10th-century minaret, the El Alimar. This later served as a model for others, such as the Giralda in Seville, and parts of it are still preserved in the current Renaissance tower.



Construction of La Mezquita, which is built over the site of a Visigothic cathedral and earlier mosque, began in 786 at the order of Abdel-Rahman I. Initially, it was designed to consist of two parts; an open courtyard for ablution rituals *Sahm*, now known as the Patio of the Orange Trees *Patio de los*

Naranjos, and a covered area which would accommodate as many as 10,000 worshippers. Three expansions later, in the 10th century, it was finally completed and, with an area of 23,400 square meters, was for centuries the largest mosque in the Islamic world. Unusually, and like the mosque in Damascus, the Mezquita faces south and not to Mecca.

Córdoba was reconquered in 1236, and small Christian chapels were added in 1258 and 1260. Nearly three centuries later, in 1523, during the reign of Carlos V, the decision was made to construct a Christian Cathedral in the centre of the mosque. Hernán Ruiz was assigned the task that, eventually, was carried on by his son and grandson and, as work wasn't completed for two centuries, the result is a mix of architectural styles ranging through Gothic, Baroque and Renaissance.

Whether inadvertent or not, the contrasting styles of the mosque and cathedral combine to produce a place of utter fascination, unique in the entire world. In addition, it is the oldest monument in day-to-day use in the Western world. Once inside, you will see hundreds of columns, many of Roman or Visigothic style, most supporting horseshoe-shaped arches constructed, alternatively, with stone and brick. No matter where you rest your gaze, the columns and arches are attended by ever-changing shafts of light and their accompanying shadows; a vista made even more intriguing by the numerous electric lanterns. At one time there were 1,290 of these but these days it's down to just 856 and, upon investigation, you will find that, not only are the arches of different colors, they are fashioned from varying materials such as jasper, marble, granite and onyx.

Wandering in and out between them becomes mesmerizing. With each step the changing colors and patterns present you with a kaleidoscopic mixture of architecture and light.

Moorish architecture and design is, by nature, intricate and colorful, and both are blended masterfully here. In addition, the Muslim faith does not permit the use of human images. When you reach the Cathedral within, the impact of the absolute contrast in styles is nearly overpowering. In the Cathedral, human images abound, whether in paint, stone or wood, particularly in the form of massive paintings of Christ and the Saints. And, the heavy ornateness and rich colors of the altar, the choir, the pulpit, and the various side chapels, appear less harmonious here.

Along the back, southernmost, wall reside, side by side, two more contrasting expressions of these faiths. The Mihrab, a small chamber with a domed roof, was built during the second expansion of the mosque by Al-Hakam II, who was enthroned in 961, and the ornamental plasterwork is simply incredible. Next to it resides the **Cathedral Museum Tesoro Catedralicio**, which holds all

manner of religious art dating from the 15th to 20th centuries. Among its many treasures, there is no doubt which is preeminent. The Arfe brothers, Enrique and Juan, are renowned for the quality, design and crafting of monstrances. One of Enrique's works, weighing over 440 lbs. and fashioned of solid silver, is on display in this museum and it was used for the first time during the Corpus Christi celebrations in 1519. **T:** 957 470 512; Open Mon-Sat 8:30-6, Sun & hols 8:30-10 and 2-6. Entrance €8, free between 8:30-10 except Sun.

Nearby is the graceful **Triunfo de San Rafael Column**, completed in 1781 at the behest of the Cathedral authorities. It commemorates the rescue of the city from an earthquake by the archangel San Rafael, whose statue adorns the top.

Jewish Quarter Barrio Judería

Where the narrow lanes and streets, sloping up and away from the La Mezquita in no discernable pattern, are home to some of Córdoba's most attractive patios. In general, throughout the area, patios, which are open courtyards quite often safeguarded by metal grille gates instead of doors, provide a useful, cooling, haven from the searing summer heat of Andalucía. Not content with practicality, though, citizens here compete aesthetically, and the results of their creative endeavors are judged biannually in the Patio Festival *Festival de los Patios Cordobeses*.



Don't be disappointed, though, if your trip does not coincide with the festival. Among the particular pleasures of a visit to Córdoba is just strolling around this quaint area taking a peek into these patios; and you can be your own judge. In the north-west corner, outside of La Mezquita, there is a tiny little street which, in truth, is not much more than an alleyway. Don't be deceived, however, the **Street of the Flowers Calleja de las Flores** is one of the most famous in Córdoba for its patios.

Synagogue Sinagoga

Calle Judíos; this curious structure, prefaced by a statue to Maimónides, is one of only three ancient synagogues remaining in Spain, with the other two being in Toledo. Completed around 1315, it is tiny indeed, measuring just 7 meters by 6.5 meters, and features intricate plaster work that is characteristic of Mudéjar art.

Following the reconquest of Granada in 1492, and the subsequent expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the synagogue was converted for use first as a hospital and then, in 1588, as a chapel and an infants' school. In 1885 it was declared a national monument.



T: 957 202 928; Open Tues-Sat 9:30-2 and 3:30-5:30, Sun & hols 9:30-1:30. Entrance EC citizens free.

Bullfighting Museum Museo Taurino

Housed in the attractive 16th-century Casa de las Bulas this may not be to everyone's taste, but it is one of the most comprehensive of its genre in Spain. The normal quota of bulls heads is complimented by various suits of light *traje de luces*, numerous posters *carteles*, a large library and permanent exhibitions dedicated to the famous Cordobés toreros, Lagartijo, Machaquito, Guerrita and, most famous of all, Manolete. The latter, often considered to be immortal, was eventually killed by a bull in the Plaza de Toros of Linares on August 28, 1947. **Note:** As of late 2009 this was temporarily closed for restoration.



Fortress and Palace of the Christian Kings Alcázar de los Reyes Católicos

Roman, Visigothic and Moorish structures were located on this site, but they were in ruins when Ferdinand III – The Saint reconquered Córdoba in 1236. Although Alfonso X started restoration, it was finally completed by Alfonso XI in the 14th century. It later became the home, for numerous subsequent years, of the Catholic Monarchs, who received Columbus and planned the reconquest of Granada here. Following the fall of Granada in 1492, it was first used by the Court of Inquisition, then subsequently functioned as a civil jail and military prison. The interior is not, as one might anticipate, ostentatious. The highlights are the **Hall of the Mosaics**, featuring ancient Roman mosaics, and a Roman stone sarcophagus that dates from the 2nd or 3rd century.

Back outside, you will note that four towers guard the walls. The tops of those that are open to visitors provide an excellent platform from which to admire the city and surrounding countryside as well as a superb, probably the best, place to take photos of the La Mezquita. The extensive gardens of the complex are a peaceful place, the design of which includes a series of rectangular ponds.

A number of these have lovely small, arching, fountains along each side; similar to, but not as stunning as, those at the Generalife in Granada. T: 957 420 151; Open Tues-Fri 8:30-7:30, Sun & hols 9:30-2:30. Entrance €4, Fri free.



Plaza del Potro

It derives its name from the fountain in the middle, which dates from 1577, and has a statue of a Colt *Potro* in its center.

This plaza has an entirely different, and even more enticing, ambiance than its neighbors, the effect of which is, unfortunately, spoiled somewhat by the proliferation of tacky tourist vendors.

On one side is a 14th-century inn, the Posada del Potro. On another is the Plateresque 15th-century **Charity Hospital** *Hospital de la Caridad*, home to two small, but noteworthy, museums.



First, the **Fine Arts Museum** *Museo de Bellas Artes*; was opened in 1862 by Rafael Romero Barros who was the father of Julio Romero de Torres. It was rebuilt in the Renaissance style in 1936 and is home to works by masters of the Italian Renaissance and includes exhibits of paintings by Bermejo, Morales, Valdés Leal, Murillo and Zurbarán, amongst others. T: 957 355 550; Open Tues 2:30-8:30, Wed-Sat 9-

8:30, Sun & hols 9-2:30; Entrance EC citizens free, others €1.5.



In addition, just across a delightful patio, enhanced with a fountain and busts, is the ever-popular **Julio Romero de Torres Museum** *Museo de Julio Romero de Torres*. The man whom this honors was born nearby and the museum, opened in 1931, contains over fifty works donated by the artist's family. Many are often mildly erotic, paintings of Cordobésé women. T: 957 491 909; Open Tues-Sat 10-2 and 4:30-6:30, Sun & hols 9:30-2:30; small admission fee, Friday free.



Palace of the Marquesses of Viana *Palacio de los Marquesses de Viana*

Plaza de Don Gome, 2. This 16th-century palace is one of the hidden jewels of Córdoba. As you enter the first patio, note that the corner column has been deliberately omitted to facilitate the entrance of horse-drawn carriages.

The house itself boasts a marvelous collection of furniture, tapestries, porcelain and leather and, of course, a library which, in concert, are a testimony to the graciousness of life, at least for some, who lived during that era. The most unusual feature, though, is the incorporation of no less than 13 entirely different and, without exception, charming patios. In 1981 this was declared a historic and artistic monument of national character, and two years later a subsequent royal decree granted it the status of Artistic Gardens. T: 957 496 741; Open Tue-Fri 10-7, Sat 10-3; Entrance full visit €6, patios only €3.



Plaza de la Corredera

This square, unique in style in Andalucía although often seen in Castile, has just three entrances. One in the northwest corner and a similar one diagonally across in the southeast corner are known as the "High and Low Arches", respectively. The main entrance is located in the south façade, which also houses the food market mercado. This lovely plaza is rectangular in shape and consists of a lower, colonnaded, level and three upper floors, embellished with galleries and balconies supported by semi-circular arches.

It was constructed by the Magistrate Corregidor Ronquillo Briceno, in the late 17th century, and in past days it was the site for bullfights and even public executions. 1896 saw the centre converted into a covered market but the roof was removed during the 1950s. At present, it hosts a general market from Monday to Saturday, with The Flea Market *Rastro* making an appearance on Sunday morning. Shoppers may also treasure-hunt in any number of second-hand junk shops strung along the fringes.

Places to Eat



Bodegas Campos, Calle de los Lineros, 32, www.bodegascampos.org 9547 497 500. A large winery turned restaurant, bar, catering. A kilometre east of the mosque, close to the river, authentic décor, well done, resourceful restaurant worth the walk.



Restaurante El Churrasco, Romero, 16; tel: 957 290 819; www.elchurrasco.com; is found in a delightful 14th-century Jewish home and is a long-time favourite in Córdoba. There are a variety of charming dining areas – including a typical patio and here, in the heart of Judería, the traditional Spanish cuisine is delightfully varied including and the wine list vast.

In fact, the wines are housed in a similar mansion just next door which is a museum in its own right and features a room with a round table divided into places for regular members of the society and one for a guest.



Restaurante Almudaina, Campo Santo de los Mártires, 1; tel 957 474 342; www.restaurantealmudaina.com; is housed in a charming 16th-century palace that was constructed for Bishop Leopold of Austria who was the uncle of the Emperor Charles V and son of Maximilian of Austria. Found next to the Mosque and in the front of the Alcazar, it has been tastefully renovated and retains its Jewish influences, Mudejar ceilings that enhance the seven distinctly different dining areas over two floors.

The patio has a glass decorative skylight featuring famous Córdoba citizens. It is acclaimed for its innovative and authentic Córdoba cuisine that is based on many years of experience including Moorish and Arabic influences with dishes, including elaborate game based ones, prepared using produce fresh from the local market.

Where to Eat Tapas & Drink

Bar Santos; Magistral Gonzalez Francés, 3; is a typical bar that, to-date, has resisted all efforts to gentrify it. Just outside the eastern wall of La Mezquita, it has no seats and much bullfighting memorabilia that makes fascinating viewing whilst enjoying a cool beer or glass of vino, and very inexpensive tapas.

La Abacería; Corregidor Luis de la Cerda, 73; tel: 957 487 050; is a great place to rest your feet and enjoy a snack from the wide range of homemade tapas sold in either half or full portions.

Conveniently, it is located just outside the western side of La Mezquita, close to the tourist office.

Practicalities

Although the Mosque/Cathedral is open on Monday, most other monuments and museums are closed.

At Easter *Semana Santa* and in May when both the city's annual fair *Feria de Mayo* and the bi-annual Festival of the Patios *Festival de los Patios Cordobés* are held, the city is likely to be very crowded.

Visitors, should be forewarned that the summer months can bring overpowering heat, so dress accordingly.

Tourist Offices

The **Oficina de Turismo de la Junta de Andalucía**, Torrijos, 10; tel: 957 355 179; www.andalucia.org; is found just west of La Mezquita and opens Mon-Fri 9:30-6:30, Sat 10-2 and 4-6 and Sun & hols 10-2.

The city of Córdoba, www.turismodecordoba.org, operates tourist information points at the following locations:

Alcázar; Campo Santo de los Mártires, s/n, tel: 902 201 774; open Mon-Sun 9-2 and 2:30-7.

Plaza de las Tendillas; tel: 902 201 774; open Mon-Sun 9:30-1:30 and 5:30-8:30.

Many Spanish cities with old, central areas are not particularly car-friendly. Córdoba, though, is far more complicated and the combination of narrow roads/lanes, complicated one-way systems and poor road signs make it a really hard place to find one's way around by car. And car parking can be extremely difficult here.

Between the river and the Mezquita there is an open-air car park, and between the Mezquita and the Alcázar there are parking meters. If it's possible to get there, underground car parks can be found directly outside of the walls of the Mezquita.



Madinat Al-Zahra

Getting There

From Córdoba take the A-431 westwards then turn right on to the CP-119 – a total trip of just 8 kms.

In 936 Abdel-Rahman III, reputedly in honor of his favorite concubine Al-Zahra, the Flower – although it could have been to enhance the reputation of him and his rein – built this amazing city/palace just five miles west of Córdoba. And splendid it must have been; detailed records indicate that building materials were brought from such distant places as Constantinople and other locations in North Africa. Despite its grandeur, it had a short life.

After the breakup of the Caliphate of Córdoba, very early in the 11th century, Madinat Al-Zahra was utilized by various factions, then eventually sacked a mere 70 years after its construction. Many of the materials were, subsequently, used on constructions in Seville and other places and, over the next 900 years, it was allowed to fall into complete disrepair. It was not until 1910 that the arduous work of excavation began. This still continues, but enough of the Madinat Al-Zahra has been unearthed for visitors to see how incredibly beautiful this city, built on three terraces, must have been. Unfortunately, the urban expansion from the city has reached here, and some recent construction has been contentious as it is thought that there may still be remains as yet undiscovered. In October, 2009, Her Majesty Queen Sofia, opened the new Interpretation Centre, which includes an audio-visual presentation. T: 957 355 506; Open Tues-Sat 10-6:30, Sun & hols 10-2; Entrance EC citizens free, others small admission fee.