

Taken back to the future through Spain's Architecture

By Andrew Forbes

For the last 30 years, Spain has had an almost unrelenting passion for modernisation. Striving to make up for possible lost time, looking forwards to the future has driven a construction boom. On the one hand it is the European 'vanguardista' of contemporary city architecture and on the other, the powerhouse of the soulless tower block. Yet this diverse, present day built environment has also been shaped by amongst others the Romans, the Arabs, and the Catholic monarchs. There are a bunch of cultural, architectural and historical routes one can use as a basis to explore these lasting legacies, many of which the United Nations Education, Scientific & Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has recognised as worthy of World Heritage status.

For literary and artistic romantics, following the route of Washington Irving, the 19th century writer, is a good choice. Taking in the cities of Seville, Cordoba and Granada you experience a heady mix of Spanish-Muslim palaces and mosques. The Alhambra palaces and gardens, in Granada, must be amongst the most iconic of this era.

Go early or late in the day off-season and you can capture the magic of this place. Exploring the courtyards and gardens you listen to the meditative splashing of fountains and smell the Mediterranean mix of jasmine, herbs and roses. Built in the 14th century, the hilltop Royal City is the final legacy of the Nasrid Dynasty and is now one of Spain's most visited sites.

My best experience of the Alhambra however has been from the air, taking a private aerial sightseeing tour with the local Granada based firm Dimension Aerea in one of their light aircraft. From this perspective you can truly capture the amazing citadel, nestling amongst pines

and outcrops of rock. No noisy queues to contend with; just a 360-degree view of one of the most fascinating and dramatic parts of Andalucía. You can also soar over the rooftops and narrow streets of the Albain Arab quarter, another UNESCO site. It's no surprise that Boabdil, the last of the Moorish kings of Granada, cried when he lost the city to Spain's Catholic monarchs.

Further west, Cordoba was the capital of the Caliphate Empire five centuries before Granada's golden era. The historic centre of Cordoba retains its maze of narrow streets, although these are now crowded with gift shops and artisans' studios. The Mezquita however is the focus of most visitors and was one of the largest mosques in the world.

Cordoba's mosque underwent major changes following the Spanish reconquista. Today you can see this extraordinary fusion of Islamic and Christian architecture as you walk amongst the warmly lit Arabic columns and double arches of marble, jasper and onyx towards the huge Renaissance Christian cathedral nave that has transplanted the former heart of the mosque.

Leaving the scented orange blossom and olive groves of the route of Washington Irving and instead taking the 'Via de la Plata' (the Silver Route) you follow in the footsteps of Roman traders that connected the south, from Seville, through valleys, between mountains and across windswept plains to the Spanish northern coast at Gijón. Developed through the centuries from medieval times to the 19th century, the route is now mostly shiny new high-speed autopista. For the first leg you can cruise in fifth gear from Andalucía's capital, Seville, to Mérida through peaceful, rolling countryside of oak forests.

What better way to uncover the roots of modern Spain than through the discovery of the country's rich and diverse architectural past? Here's a snapshot taking in some of the country's most popular routes and its UNESCO blockbuster sites.

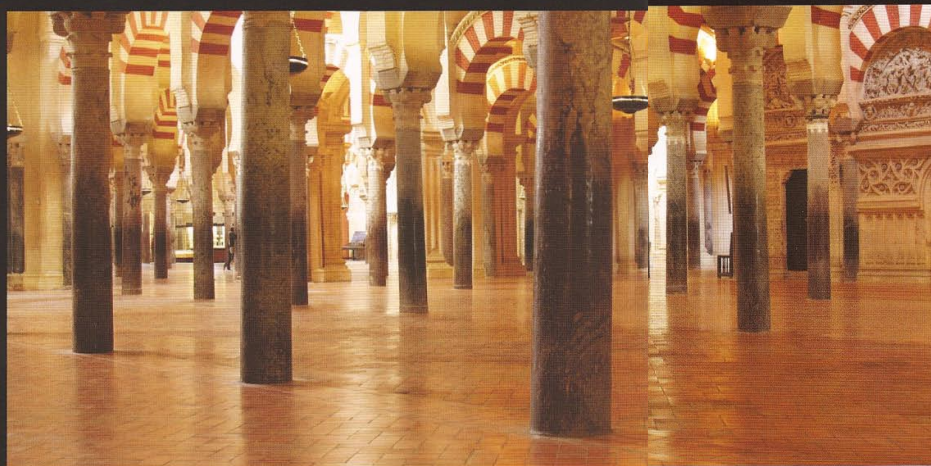


Almost like an open-air Roman museum, Mérida, the capital city of Extremadura, offers surprises at every turn. No other city in Spain can boast so many Roman monuments. I find it unexpected to walk out of a paper shop or small café and suddenly be confronted by a Roman temple at one turn and a Roman triumphal arch at another. Stroll up past a shabby apartment block and suddenly you might stumble across one of Europe's finest Roman circuses; or cast a view across the skyline and see the huge aqueduct that brought water from the mountains.

Yet, in my mind, the most impressive site is the Roman theatre, a remarkable centrepiece to the city's entertainment hub, complete with adjacent gladiatorial amphitheatre.

As walled cities go though, few in Europe can compare with Avila, in Castile-León, a touch further north on the silver route. Built on a huge rocky outcrop, it dominates the landscape like a clichéd fairy tale citadel. Some eighty-eight towers punctuate the ancient walls protecting palaces, churches, narrow streets and the huge gothic, 800-year old cathedral. Considered to be the first gothic cathedral in Spain, the building looks more like a fortress than a church, with its battlements and sturdy towers. Yet most don't come here for the architecture, but instead for the greatest of Castile's gourmet delicacies, 'cochinillo asado' or suckling pig. No walking tour should be without a long, lazy few hours spent in a cosy restaurant enjoying a traditional garlic and herb flavoured dish, with creamy potatoes and roasted sweet cabbage - and of course a glass or two of one the fine local reds.

Castile-León is a favourite province of mine and it has more than its fair share of historic cities. These aren't sleepy museums though but living, animated communities. Take Salamanca; it may be one of Europe's finest university cities, but this is no snooty backwater. Its rich extravagant mix of Roman, gothic, Arab, baroque and renaissance buildings resonate with the energy and vibrancy of university life. One of my favourite civic buildings is the Casa de las Conchas (House of Shells). Now a public library, this romantic 16th century mansion is decorated on the outside with hundreds of shell motifs, making for a truly unique appearance. The story goes that one of the early owners of the mansion was a Knight of the Order of Santiago (St James). As an amorous display to his wife he adopted the classic shell motif that you see all the way along the Camino de Santiago route and throughout the ancient city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, as his architectural accessory of choice.



Segovia, Castile-León's capital, is well known for its iconic Roman aqueduct that arches across the valley to the ancient city centre that clings to a stony, narrow promontory. The setting is no less than spectacular: its position affording expansive views across the surrounding plains. The city's gothic cathedral is best seen from the towers of the Alcazar castle. Although like other Alcazars in Spain, Segovia's castle started life as an Arab fortress, this huge fortification has a romantic, theatrical, medieval style. Its multiple pointed conical turrets and crenellated towers reflect frequent architectural changes over the centuries. Dominating a stony crag overlooking two small rivers, Segovia's old town and cathedral, the castle was more a palace than a fortress and a favourite residence of local monarchs in the Middle Ages.

Considering royal castles, few can eclipse the awesome structure that is the Monastery of San Lorenzo de Escorial, a small town near Madrid. The building was both a monastery and royal palace, reflecting a time when state and church were practically inseparable in Spain. Started in the 16th century, for me it has an undeniably Austrian flavour and when one considers the intertwined royal houses of Spain and Austria at the time, I guess that shouldn't be such a surprise. Despite its purpose as a religious and royal building, the local grey granite gives the structure a cold, fortress like quality that is emphasised by the simplicity of the structure.

The basement has been the burial site for Spanish monarchs for the last half millennium and with quite a few niches yet to be filled, the architect was clearly paying close attention to his brief to create an eternal memory for the Spanish monarchy! Avoid any temptation to take a guided tour. The property is so huge that little over halfway through the visit I was fidgety and restless as I used to be some 30 years ago on those deadly boring school trips. This time I was able to escape to the tranquility of the 'Gardens of the Friars' that provided a welcome respite from architectural information overload.

As a footnote, if you want a fascinating, if at times uneasy, insight through architecture into Spain's modern history, leave the UNESCO trail behind and head out north for eight miles from the quaint town of San Lorenzo de Escorial to the Valley of the Fallen (Valle de los Caídos).

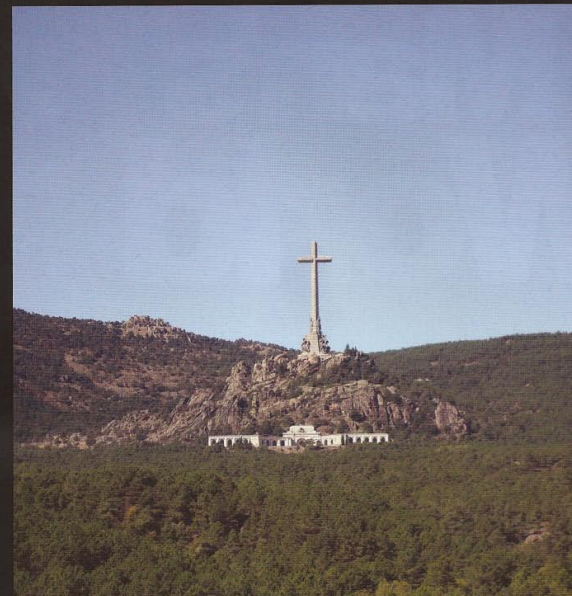


Here the adjective extraordinary is fairly applied. Built during the 1940s and 50s, this monumental basilica has a real Gotham City vibe. Ask a Spaniard about this hidden location and you will surely receive mixed responses. Although constructed as a monument to commemorate all those who died during the 1930s Spanish Civil War, it is inevitable that the place is also regarded as a nationalistic monument instead to the man who commissioned it, namely Francisco Paulino Hermenegildo Teófilo Franco.

Walking towards the basilica, excavated into a huge outcrop of rock surrounded by pine forests, you cannot help but be stunned by the sight of the huge 200,000-ton cross piercing the sky above.

Once inside, you need time for your eyes to adjust to the dimly lit nave. At the foot of the altar are the graves of Francisco Franco and José Antonio Primo de Rivera. Surprisingly, as a national monument, no debate is made onsite within the tourist narrative signs or visitor guides about the rights and wrongs of the place. This politically and socially sensitive location is practically a blank canvas - visitors must take their own view.

For me, fascination compelled me to visit. I wanted to see the place for myself. I think by visiting the Valley of the Fallen it shows how architecture can keep alive an uncomfortable memory that is possibly too easily forgotten in a Spain that prefers to always look forward, towards the future. ▣



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