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Ancient bridge by the Romans/Modern bridge by Santiago Calatrava - Merida

Photos by Circa Tours

In Depth Spain and Gibraltar

Madrid - Andalusia - Gibraltar - Merida
(18 days - 16 nights)

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SAMPLE ITINERARY

This is an example of a possible itinerary. It can be resized, reorganized and customized to fit your interests, budget and schedule. It can also be combined with other tours.

HIGHLIGHTS (18 days - 16 nights)

DAY	ACTIVITIES	NIGHT
1	Leave U.S.	
2	Arrive in Madrid . Private airport transfer	Madrid
3	Private walking tour. Afternoon at leisure	Madrid
4	Day trip to Toledo ¹	Madrid
5	Day trip to Avila and Segovia ¹	Madrid
6	Half-day trip to El Escorial ¹ . Afternoon at leisure	Madrid
7	High-speed train to Cordoba . Private walking tour	Cordoba
8	Train to Granada . Private walking tour	Granada
9	Private tour of the Alhambra . Afternoon at leisure	Granada
10	Pick up rental car. Self-drive to Malaga . Private walking tour	Malaga
11	Self-drive to Ronda and visit ²	Malaga
12	Self-drive to Gibraltar and visit ²	Cadiz
13	Self-drive to Jerez de la Frontera and Arcos de la Frontera and visit ²	Carmona
14	Self-drive to Roman Merida and visit ²	Merida
15	Self-drive to Seville . Return rental car. Private walking tour. At leisure	Seville
16	Seville at leisure (hop on/off bus). Flamenco show	Seville
17	Half-day trip to Roman Italica ¹ . Afternoon high-speed train to Madrid	Madrid
18	Private airport transfer. Return to U.S.	

¹ Guided excursions by motor coach, with different groups of travelers each trip. ² Self-guided visits

ITINERARY (for more options, see our "Spain Highlights")

Day 1: Leave U.S.

Day 2: Arrive in **Madrid**. Relax during your private airport transfer to your hotel. Enjoy the rest of the day on your own. You may want to start exploring the Plaza Mayor, Plaza del Sol, Gran Via, Cibeles Fountain, etc.

Day 3: Your local guide welcomes you to Spain and introduces you to the capital city this morning. Your walking tour will include the Royal Palace and old parts of Madrid. Afterwards, you can visit the Prado, Thyssen, Sorolla or Reina Sofia Museums at your own pace. Please note: the Prado, Thyssen Bornemisza and Sorolla museums are closed on Mondays. The Reina Sophia museum is closed on Tuesdays.



The Royal Palace is one of the most popular attractions in Madrid. This elegant building is one of Europe's greatest palaces, in close competition with the likes of Versailles in Paris, Schonbrunn in Vienna and the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. It was built in the 1700s by King Philip V, the grandson of Louis XIV. With over 2,000 rooms - only a handful of which can be visited, of course - it is full of sumptuous interiors: luxurious tapestries, priceless porcelain, elegant furniture and more. (The palace is still used for official state receptions, so it is sometimes closed to the public.)



Day 4: This morning, you're off to **Toledo**. Your tour includes the following visits: The Cathedral; the Church of St. Tomé with El Greco's masterpiece, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*; Synagogue of Santa María la Blanca; Museum of Victorio Macho; Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes; famous technique of Damasquinado (encrusting of precious metals in steel) and panoramic sightseeing of the city.

Day 5: Today's excursion takes you to **Avila** and **Segovia**. The first reason for visiting Segovia is its monumental mile-long Roman aqueduct running through the heart of the city. Built some 2,000 years ago, it continued to be in use until the 1970s. The second reason is the castle perched on top of a

rock, looking like the prow of a ship and visible for miles from the flat lands below. This 11th-century structure was renovated in the 19th century after a fire, so it is in pristine shape today. It is arguably one of the most photographed castles in Europe. The third reason is the magnificent Gothic cathedral, complete with a cloister and surrounded by the palaces, churches and mansions of Segovia's old quarter.

Avila is located about 60 miles north of Madrid. At 3,500 feet above sea level, it is a cool alternative to Madrid on hot summer days. This medieval city is famous for its massive two-mile-long fortifications encircling the old city and its equally impressive 89 guard towers and entrance gates. It is also known as the birth place of the great Santa Teresa de Jesús. The presence of the 16th-century mystic is felt everywhere around the old city: statuary, museums and the convent she founded. With its Romanesque churches, gothic palaces and an imposing 12th-century cathedral, Avila is an ideal place for walking tours.

Day 6: A shorter, half-day trip is on the schedule this morning - **El Escorial**. The Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 30 miles from Madrid, is a grandiose complex of imposing but austere buildings and palaces. It is a strong statement for Spain as a major world power in the 16th century, the time of the Conquistadors. Architecturally, it exudes power rather than elegance but it is well worth a visit.



Day 7: Board the high-speed train for a 2 1/2-hour trip to **Cordoba**, where your local guide will meet you for an afternoon walking tour of La Mezquita, the Alcazar and the Synagogue.

Cordoba is a medium-sized city on the Guadalquivir River in Andalusia (southern Spain). It was founded in Roman times and later became the capital of the Caliphate of Córdoba, which governed almost all of the Iberian peninsula. It has been estimated that in the latter half of the 10th century Cordoba, with up to 500,000 inhabitants, was then the most populated city in Europe and possibly in the world. It was known as an advanced cultural and economic center. In 1236 it was captured from the Moors by King Ferdinand III during the Spanish *Reconquista*.

La Mezquita is a Roman Catholic cathedral originally built as a mosque on the site of what previously had been a Visigothic Christian church. In 784, Emir Abd ar-Rahman I started rebuilding the earlier Visigothic church as a mosque, a process which continued for two centuries. After the capture of Cordoba in 1236, the mosque was turned into a church, with a Gothic cathedral inserted into the center of the large Moorish building. Under Charles V, a Renaissance nave was added in the middle of the structure. Artisans and architects continued to add to the existing structure until the late 18th century. Today, you can really feel the centuries of history as you walk beneath the giant arches of various styles, formed by hundreds of columns of jasper, onyx, marble and granite.



Near the Mezquita on the banks of the Guadalquivir River, is the **Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos** ("Palace of the Christian Monarchs"). The fortress served as one of the primary residences of Queen Isabella of Castile and her husband King Ferdinand II of Aragon in the 15th century. The two monarchs also used the Alcázar for one of the first permanent tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition and as a headquarters for their campaign against the Nasrid dynasty in Granada, the last remaining Moorish kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula. In 1492, the monarchs met Christopher Columbus in the Alcázar before his first voyage to the Americas. Napoleon Bonaparte used the Alcázar as a garrison in 1810, after which it was turned into a prison.



The Synagogue, located in the Jewish Quarter of Córdoba, was built in the Mudejar style in 1315. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the building was devoted to various functions including a hospital, a chapel for shoemakers and a nursery school, but it retains its original character. It was declared a National Monument in 1885.

Other places of interest:

- **Old City Patios.** Private Andalusian courtyards decorated with flowers.
- **Calahorra Tower** with its Museum of Three Cultures (Jewish, Christian and Muslim)

Day 8: The train to **Granada** this morning is a “regular” train, giving you more time to enjoy the rolling Andalusian countryside. Upon arrival, join up with your private guide for a walking tour of the old city (Albaicín, the Cathedral, Alcaiceria and the Royal Chapel).

The **Albaicín** is Granada’s ancient Moorish quarter reminiscent of a long-gone, mysterious world. Of particular interest is the Plaza de San Nicolas, with breathtaking views of the mighty Alhambra on the hill facing it.

Granada’s **Cathedral** is the second largest in Spain after Seville. It was started in the 16th century, and the massive structure displays a combination of Renaissance and Baroque styles. The main chapel contains two kneeling effigies of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, who finished the reconquest of Spain from the Moors in 1492.

Originally a Moorish silk market, the **Alcaiceria** is a network of narrow lanes laid out like an Arab bazaar. The atmosphere takes you back centuries. Today, it is still a market of sorts, although the shoppers are mainly tourists.

The lavish **Royal Chapel** is the mausoleum of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Catholic Monarchs who ruled at the time of the voyages of Christopher Columbus. It also holds the remains of their daughter Queen Juana (Joan the Mad), her husband Philip the Handsome and the Infante Miguel, their oldest grandson. The Chapel’s lacy Plateresque Gothic style is richly ornate and one of the best examples of this style in Spain. The carved marble faces of the two monarchs are considered to be a good likeness of Ferdinand and Isabella. The high altar is one of the finest Renaissance works in all of Spain.

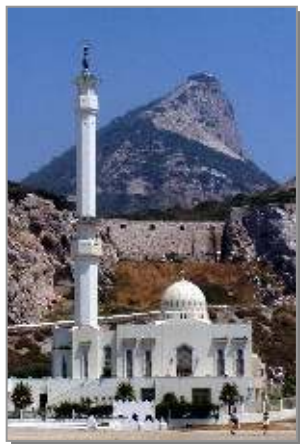


Day 9: This morning is arguably the high point of your Spain tour: a visit of the amazing **Alhambra**, an expansive Moorish palace and fortress with unique architecture and beautiful gardens. This complex is a cluster of four different sites perched side by side on top of a hill: the **Nasrid Palace**, an exquisite combination of rooms and courtyards - the famous Courtyard of the Lions is one of them - where the Muslim rulers lived; the beautifully manicured **Generalife Gardens**, planted in the 1930s; the **Palace of Charles V**, Spain’s most impressive Renaissance building; and the **Alcazaba**, an empty fortress with panoramic views over Granada. The Alhambra is one of the most visited tourist destinations in Europe. The culture and historical events reflected by this place make for an incredible touring experience. Afternoon at leisure.

Day 10: Today, you take off on your own. Pick up your rental car and head south toward the Costa del Sol and the beautiful Mediterranean city of **Malaga** for a private walking tour of the old quarter with its cathedral, castle, Roman amphitheater and the “piece de resistance” - the Picasso Museum.



Day 11: Today, treat yourself to a day trip to one of the prettiest “white villages” in Andalusia - **Ronda**. Perched on top of a rocky promontory, its beauty is enhanced by the dramatic location on either side of a 350-ft deep gorge spanned by a massive stone bridge built in the 18th century. The old section offers many beautifully decorated mansions with shaded patios as well as baths and minarets from the Moorish past. The new town has the oldest bullring in Spain, built in the 1700s, complete with a small but



informative bullfight museum. Located roughly half-way between Malaga and Seville, it is a very popular destination for visitors.

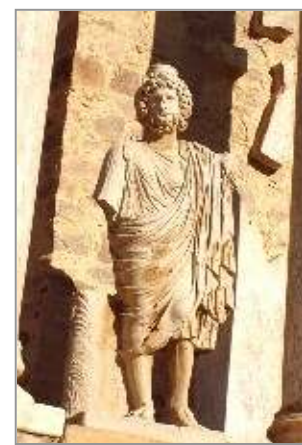
Day 12: Today's self-guided excursion will take you to another country outside of Spain: **Gibraltar**, in the U.K. Enjoy the scenic drive along the Mediterranean coast before reaching the province of Cadiz. All traffic entering Gibraltar has to go through the Gibraltar airport, which means actually driving across the runway. You can start your visit at Europe Point, the southernmost point of Europe. On a clear day, you can see Africa on the other side of the strait. On to the Saint Michael caves and the monkey park and maybe some duty-free shopping before continuing on to Cadiz.

Day 13: Another day on your own at the tip of Andalusia to visit the quaint town of **Jerez de la Frontera**, the world capital of sherry wine, and the picturesque "white village" of **Arcos de la Frontera**.

In addition to sherry, Jerez is famous as the home of the **Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art**, a riding school comparable to the world-famous Spanish Riding School in Vienna. They normally offer a dressage demonstration on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Arcos de la Frontera is one of the famous "white villages" in southern Spain. At the top of the hill is the old town center with the Church of Santa Maria and the old fort across from a palace that has been turned into a Parador hotel. You'll see rows of white-washed homes descending the narrow streets. The town commands a magnificent view of the peak of San Cristobal and the Guadalete Valley.

Day 14: The Romans were in this area long before you arrived. The most impressive remnants of this long-gone civilization are preserved in **Merida** (75 miles north of Seville, at the center of the Extremadura region). This quaint, medieval city has Spain's largest and most amazing grouping of Roman structures: a well-preserved Teatro Romano, built in 25 B.C. (still used for theatrical performances today), an amphitheater, arches of an aqueduct, houses with exquisite mosaic floors and a impressive museum of Roman artifacts, the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano (designed by famous Spanish architect Rafael Moneo). Merida also boasts a Moorish citadel and an 18th-century convent, now used as a luxury Parador hotel.



Day 15: Return to **Seville** this morning. Drop off your rental car and enjoy a private walking tour with visits of the Cathedral and Giralda bell tower, the Alcazar and the Jewish quarter of Santa Cruz.

Seville, located on the banks of the Guadalquivir River, is the artistic, cultural, and financial capital of southern Spain. Its known history goes back to Roman times, and since it was controlled by the Moors from 712 to 1248 AD, it was heavily influenced by Arabic culture. It was taken by the Catholic King Ferdinand III during the *Reconquista*.

The 15th-century **Cathedral of Seville** was built on the former site of the city's mosque. It is the largest Gothic cathedral in the world and is lavishly decorated with gold and silver from the New World. The famous *Giralda*, originally a minaret, was converted into a bell tower. The Cathedral is also known for housing the remains of Christopher Columbus on a large raised platform, although there is some evidence that his remains may be in the Dominican Republic. In any event, the Cathedral and the memorial to Columbus are quite impressive.



The **Alcázar of Seville** (Spanish "Alcázares Reales de Sevilla") is a royal palace across from the Cathedral. Construction started in 1181 under the Moors and continued for over 500 years. Its peaceful gardens are a blend of Moorish, Andalusian, and Christian traditions. The palace is one of the best remaining examples of mudéjar architecture, and the upper levels are still used by the royal family as their official Seville residence.

The Barrio de Santa Cruz, the former Jewish quarter of the medieval city, which is characterized by narrow, winding streets and whitewashed houses.

Other places of interest:

- **Plaza de España and Maria Luisa Park**, both built for the 1929 Exposición Ibero-Americana international fair. The ceramic tile decorations illustrating provinces of Spain are exquisite.
- **Basilica de la Macarena** with its Weeping Virgin and floats from the “Semana Santa” (Holy Week) religious processions that are performed every spring in Seville.
- **The Torre de Oro** (golden tower)
- **Casa de Pilatos**, a magnificent Mudéjar-style palace dating back to the 16th century.
- **La Isla Magica** (Magic Island) theme park
- **Museo Palacio de la Condesa de Lebrija**, a stunningly beautiful 18th-century aristocratic mansion furnished with Phoenician, Greek, and Roman artifacts
- **La Maestranza** bull ring
- **Salvador church**, the second largest church in Seville after the Cathedral
- **Museum of Fine Arts** where lesser-known but still top-notch art by Zurbarán, Murillo and others is on display
- Various other museums including a **Flamenco Museum**, which explains the history, technique and art of Andalusia’s signature dance.



Day 16: With your hop-on-hop-off bus tickets you can explore and discover on your own all that Seville has to offer. Tonight attend the quintessential Andalusian event that reveals the heart and soul of this region: a Flamenco performance.

Day 17: Today, visit more of Roman Spain in **Italica**, another site with some of Spain’s most impressive Roman ruins. This ancient place, just a few miles outside Seville, used to be a thriving city of great military importance. Emperors Hadrian and Trajan were born there. A 20,000-spectator amphitheater, mosaic floors, thermal baths and a theater can be seen there today. Savor your last few hours in the south of Spain before returning to Madrid on the AVE train tonight.

Day 18: Private airport transfer. Return to U.S.

Hello, my name is **Pierre Mainguéné**. I personally handcrafted this itinerary.



I am the co-founder and president of Circa Tours. I was born and raised in Brittany, France so, as a native European, I love everything about the “old country” especially France, Spain and Portugal, the three countries we specialize in. I love their history (and there is lots of it), their art (same thing), their cuisine (especially in France, Catalonia and the Basque Country), their wine (everywhere), their lifestyle and the endless diversity of the local cultures.

In dozens of trips I have taken to Europe, I have traveled to nearly every corner of those countries, and I continue my journey of discovery every year. I am a Travel-Institute certified France and Spain Specialist, and I am also recognized by the Tourist Office of Portugal as a certified Portugal Specialist.

My goal is to create the best possible trip for you. I am always ready to listen to your wishes (however creative) and feedback, and I will always enjoy sharing my experiences with you.

That’s me, by the way, in front of a Joaquin Sorolla painting in Madrid. And, the following are some comments made by a few of our clients:

- “Our trip was fantastic! We had such a wonderful time! All went well including getting our train tickets to Seville changed the day of the strike. Our guides were nothing less than phenomenal! We can't thank you and your staff enough for putting together a trip that was worthy of our 30th anniversary celebration!” M.B., Massachusetts
- “Pierre. Thank you for your services. I really enjoyed dealing with you. You are so knowledgeable, pleasant and professional. I certainly will recommend you to friends.” J.L., Colorado
- “It was not a good trip - it was a GREAT trip! Truly everything was fabulous, ran smoothly, and worked well. The guides were excellent, the itinerary perfect. We enjoyed Spain very much and will ask you for assistance on our next journey to southern Europe!” J.K., California
- “Circa Tours did a good job. They worked very closely with us in putting the program together. We were very pleased with how efficient everything ran. The information we received from Circa Tours was done up very well, which allowed us to just pull the appropriate paperwork and be on our way. The tours were very well done. The guides we had with the local travel providers did a very good job of explaining the areas we toured. Pierre at Circa Tours made sure we saw a bit of everything.” D.T., Florida
- “We are all home, safe and sound - very tired, but in a hazy daze of love for France. Thank you and Carolyn SO much for arranging such an amazing trip for all of us. Throughout the trip, my sisters, mom and myself could be heard saying such things as, “THANK YOU, PIERRE”...or, “thank goodness for Pierre!!!” Martine was an excellent guide, by the way...very good, nice, thorough and professional. We wouldn't have been able to do HALF of what we did (and certainly not with nearly as much carefree enjoyment) with out her. Thank you and Carolyn for all of you expertise and care in helping us and doing all of the hard work for us! Thank you! Thank you!!!” K.B., Iowa