

Córdoba - also spelled **Cordova** in English, is a city and capital of the province of the same name. It is the 3rd largest city in Andalusia, after Sevilla and Málaga, and the 12th largest in Spain. Córdoba has the highest summer temperatures in Spain and Europe, with average high temperatures around 37 °C (99 °F) in July and August.

It was a Roman settlement, taken over by the Visigoths, after which came the Muslim conquests in the eighth century, when it became an imperial city under the Caliphate of Córdoba. During the Muslim periods, Córdoba was transformed into a world leading centre of education and learning, and by the 10th century it had grown to be the second-largest city in Europe. The **Moors** (people mostly from North Africa initially: over time the name was applied to all Arabs) had invaded the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, and Malta, ruling parts of Spain for around 700 years.

During the Christian Reconquista in 1236, the **siege of Córdoba** by the forces of Ferdinand III, king of Castile and León, marked the end of the Islamic rule over the city that had begun in 711.

Córdoba is still home to many notable examples of Moorish architecture – particularly
* **La Mezquita**, an immense mosque dating from 784 A.D., featuring a columned prayer hall and older Byzantine mosaics. After it became a Catholic church in 1236, a Renaissance-style nave was added in the 17th century. Now a cathedral, it was named as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984



UNESCO status has since encompassed the whole historic centre of Córdoba, including
* **The Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos**, a medieval fortress located next to the Guadalquivir River and near the Grand Mosque. It was one of the primary residences of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon: its construction was ordered by King Alfonso XI of Castile in 1328



* The **Roman bridge of Córdoba** originally built in the early 1st century BC across the Guadalquivir river, though it has been reconstructed at various times since. Most of the present structure dates from the Moorish reconstruction in the 8th century:



The Roman bridge and [Guadalquivir](#) river

From Cordoba to **Lora del Rio**, and then again at **Seville** we are never far from river and rail:

Rio Guadalquivir (from the Arabic *al-wādī l-kabīr*, meaning "the great river") is the fifth longest river in the Iberian Peninsula and the second longest river with its entire length in Spain. The Guadalquivir river is the only great navigable river in Spain - currently from the Gulf of Cádiz to Seville, but in Roman times as far as Córdoba. The river is 657 km (408 mi) long and flows into the Gulf of Cádiz, in the Atlantic Ocean.

Linea de alta velocidad Madrid-Sevilla (the **Madrid–Sevilla high-speed line**) 472-kilometer-long was the first Spanish high-speed rail connection, and been in use since April 1992, at speeds up to 300 km/h (186 mph). Travel time between the two end points was reduced by over half. The line crosses 31 bridges (total length 9,845 meters) and goes through 17 tunnels (total length 16.03 kilometres). The high-speed line was constructed at standard gauge, in contrast with the rest of the Spanish railway network

At **Almodovar del Rio** on the left bank of the *Guadalquivir*, sits **Castillo de Almodóvar del Río** (*Hisnu-l-mudawar*; "the round castle") Previously a Roman fort, the current structure is of Arab origin, dating from 760. During the Middle Ages, it underwent several renovations and reconstructions. Over thirty-five years at the beginning of the last century, it was carefully restored by the owner, the 12th Count of Torralva, under the technical direction of architect Adolfo Fernández Casanova (no relation, as far as I know!)

Part of the 7th season of *Game of Thrones* was filmed here: it depicted House Tyrell's home Highgarden, and also parts of Casterly Rock, the ancestral home of House Lannister.



Still on *Rio Guadalquivir*, we reach **Posadas**, whose most picturesque part is *Plaza de los Lavaderos*, containing the communal washing area and a water source known as *Pilar de Triana*: this was a watering hole for cattle and its surplus waters were used to irrigate several orchards. Washer women would sing or chatter, sharing rumours and tales about life in general (sounds a treat!)

Palma del Rio is particularly stunning, we are told, when the orange trees that line its streets are out in flower and the fragrance of orange blossom fills the town. The fruit have a major influence on local dishes, such as *huevos fritos con naranjas* (fried eggs with orange) [think I'll pass on that!] *codornices con naranja* (quail with orange), *flan de naranja* (orange flan), *bizcocho de naranja* (orange sponge cake) and *naranjas en dulce* (oranges in syrup).



Once more Muslim/Christian antagonisms were in play: the castle and wall were built during the 11th and 12th centuries, respectively, with the clear objective of protecting the town from increasingly frequent attacks by Christian troops, who finally conquered the village in 1231

Casa Museo Manuel Benítez "El Cordobés" shows the life of the famous matador of the 1960s who brought an unorthodox acrobatic and theatrical style to the bullring. Reared in an orphanage, then a construction-worker and petty criminal, at the age of 23 he dreamed of being a bullfighter. One of his original and dangerous techniques was when, in a stark departure from formality, standing with his back to the bull as it charged, he moved his right leg out moments before the bull was upon him, causing the bull to swerve and allowing El Cordobés a moment to [description deleted.....] This manoeuvre was repeated in bullfights across Spain, sometimes with even more dangerous variations. In May 1964, on his first appearance at the bullring of Madrid, and watched on television by many Spaniards, the bullfight ended with the near-fatal goring of El Cordobés on the horns of the bull. Yet twenty-two days later El Cordobés fought again. By the time of his first retirement, in 1971, El Cordobés had become the highest-paid matador in history.

Similar gastronomic delights await us as we reach **Penaflo**, located at the north east border of the province of Seville, and also blessed with an array of historic and religious buildings. The Romans had traded olive oil along *Rio Guadalquivir* but following the Visigothic period, the town entered a period of decay that lasted several centuries, until reborn during Muslim rule.

Lora del Rio merits a similar description as the location of many religious foundations, following the end of Arab rule. As with many Spanish towns and cities there are numerous religious festivals – no fewer than six are celebrated here between January and May.

The 18th century saw an economic boom. Throughout the 19th century, important changes took place thanks to the introduction of new crop irrigation systems and the arrival of immigrants from other regions. By the 20th century, Lora del Río were cultivating olive groves, vines, oaks, orange trees, fruit trees, and cereals; it was also home to several factories producing olive oil, brandy, soap, bread, tiles, bricks, and paper

Now our route turns south, away from the great river for a while – although we then cross *Rio Corbones*, which does the clever trick of flowing *under* a bridge carrying *Rio Guadalquivir* in order to join it further north – I suspect human intervention historically.



Carmona is built on a ridge overlooking the central plain of Andalusia: the city is known for its thriving trade in wine, olive oil, grain and cattle, and holds an annual fair in April – so we have just missed it. Once more a place crammed with historic buildings – the Romans were here in force, leaving an amphitheatre and a huge necropolis, with over 900 family tombs - and churches: 15 in all.

Once we have tasted some typical Carmonan dishes (*tagarnina* (thistles), or *cuajados* (curdled eggs), anyone?), a major delicacy for the sweet-toothed is *torta inglese*:



Perhaps before sitting down for dinner (which of course the Spanish do in the middle of the night anyway!) we might embark on a pub crawl of various bars, called the *Ruta de las tapas* (Tapas Route)? Described as 'noteworthy' it is marked with blue and white signs, and even appears in the seal of the city.

On the border between the 'twin' towns of **El Viso del Alcor** and **Mairena del Alcor** used to stand a great stone, *La Piedra del Gallo*, where residents would gather and eat. After it became part of a private property, and it was decided to place it within a roundabout which presumably put an end to any more shilly-shallying.

Now we are on the approach to Seville, one of the great cities of Spain, where once more we link up with the great *Rio Guadalquivir*.

SEVILLA onwards to GIBRALTAR to follow