

# Spain - A Jewish Itinerary



Though Jews were forbidden to live in Spain for hundreds of years after the expulsion of 1492, there are still many sites of Jewish interest in Spain. This itinerary is one we followed in January 1996, and is as good a basis as any for planning your own trip.

## Jewish History in Spain

Jews appear to have arrived in Spain well before the beginning of the Christian era. Tarshish, the city to which the prophet Jonah attempted to flee before his encounter with the large fish, is believed by some to have been in Spain. There are more than five hundred localities in Spain in which a Jewish presence has been confirmed. There were established and flourishing Jewish communities not only in the large cities, but also in villages and towns throughout the country, even in areas which are today regarded as remote.

Spain, despite its distance from Rome, was an important province of the Roman empire and produced more than its share of emperors and generals. With the establishment of Christianity in Spain under the Visigoths, one of the Church's first orders of business was the ruthless oppression of Judaism. As early as 313 AD, a Council of Bishops in Elvira (thought to be near present-day Granada) enacted a series of anti-Jewish laws. Many of the clerics who were later canonized by the Church earned their sainthood as rabid anti-Semites: most notably Isidore of Seville (who was later declared by the Vatican to be the patron saint of the Internet).

### The Arab Conquest

Starting in 717, the Arabs conquered Spain in only three years, crossing the Pyrenees into France and halting only after they were defeated by Charles Martel at Tours in 732. The Arab conquest relieved the Jews of Spain, as it had the Jews of Erez Israel some sixty years earlier, from relentless Church-sanctioned and encouraged anti-Semitism that was exceeded in its ferocity and cruelty only by the Inquisition that succeeded it seven hundred years later on the same soil.

In Islamic Spain, Jews enjoyed for the most part a better life than did Jews in other parts of Europe, though periods of persecution were not unknown. It was during one of these intervals of forced conversions (under the Almohades, a fanatic Berber sect) that the family of Maimonides fled Cordoba and took refuge in Egypt, after years of wandering through North Africa. Yet on the whole, Islamic rule in Spain was relatively tolerant of minorities, Jews and Christians alike, and Jewish life flourished there. (In those days, tolerance was a gift from the ruler rather than a right of the ruled.)

Christian Europe at the end of Christianity's first millennium was a savage, barbarous and ignorant place. An uneasy alliance of illiterate, unwashed warlords and (for the most part equally illiterate and unwashed) clerics held dominion over starving peasants, keeping them well-fed with assurances of eternal salvation in the world to come in exchange for suffering in silence the depravities of their rulers (both secular and clerical) in this world. In contrast, Muslim Spain was an enlightened center of tolerance and scholarship rivaled only by the Islamic centers in the East, notably Baghdad and Damascus. Strange as it may seem today, Islam was once the very model of tolerance.

### The Christian Reconquest

Almost immediately after the Islamic conquest, the remaining Christian kingdoms in the remote mountains of the north began the slow process of expansion that came eventually to be known as the *reconquista*. The Arabs, beset by internal struggles, gradually lost ground over the centuries. In 1085, the Christian King Alfonso VI conquered the strategically important city of Toledo and made it his capital.

In contrast to those who followed him, Alfonso VI was a tolerant king who established Toledo as a center of learning, employing Jewish and Islamic scholars to translate classical works (originally written in Greek, which was then almost unknown in Western Europe) from Arabic to Latin. From Toledo, the translated works spread to the rest of Europe.

### The End of Jewish Life in Spain

In the next centuries, the Christian reconquest spread slowly southward into Andalusia. Cordoba fell in 1236, and Seville in 1248. During the centuries of the *reconquista*, the idea of a racially and religiously pure Spain became a national goal. The fragile tolerance of minorities that had sometimes characterized Spanish society was its casualty.

The Dominican Order was at the forefront of anti-Semitic agitation. In the north, the Dominican friars had organized, with the help of converts, so-called "disputations" in which the Talmud — which for some reason attracted the greatest part of the Christian antagonism — was invariably condemned to be burned. This was not an exclusively Spanish pastime: in 1225,

seventy-five wagonloads of Jewish manuscripts were burned in the Place de Hotel de Ville after Paris' Jews predictably lost a similar disputation.

In Spain, there was no respite from these persecutions. One incident followed another until in 1391, the fanatically anti-Semitic friar Vincent Ferrer incited a pogrom in Seville in which most of the local Jews were murdered and their synagogues set on fire or converted to churches. Many Jews saved themselves from death only by accepting baptism, and a small minority escaped both fates and continued to live as Jews.

Flush with his success in Seville, Ferrer traveled to the other large cities in the country, inciting rioting, murder, looting and forcing baptisms wherever he went. It is estimated that a hundred thousand Jews lost their lives by the time the pogroms finally subsided, and a similar number accepted forced baptism. Among the dead was the son of Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (Tur), himself the son of Rabbi Asher (Rosh). Rabbi Asher had come to Spain only eighty years before to escape persecution in his native Germany. Such was the precarious situation of Jews in medieval Christian Europe. The events of 1391, following so soon after the Black Death of 1348, left Spain's Jewish community a shell of its former self.

With the fall of Granada on 2 January, 1492, the Christian reconquest of Spain was complete. Interestingly enough, Ferdinand and Isabella made a point of wearing Moorish dress when they accepted the surrender of Boabdil, Granada's last king.

The **Order of Expulsion**, signed by them a few months later in the Alhambra on 31 March 1492, marked the end of the more than fifteen centuries of Jewish life in Spain. Moslems were allowed to linger on in Spain a few years longer, but in 1517 the few remaining Moslems were forcibly converted. Spain was pure at last.

## Day-to-Day Itinerary

### Sunday (day 1) — Flight into Madrid

We decided to spend as little time as possible in Madrid, since the focus of our trip was Jewish history in Spain before the expulsion. So we drove to Toledo directly from Madrid's Barajas airport, some 90 kilometers away.

#### TOLEDO

When you see Toledo, you understand why its Jewish residents called it the "Jerusalem of the West."

The former Judería is in the southwest part of the walled city, near the gate known today as the Cambron Gate but once called "Bab al Yahud." Ten of Toledo's synagogues are reported to have been destroyed in 1391, but remarkably, two survive as museums. They had been converted to churches and are known today as Santa Maria La Blanca and El Transito.

El Transito houses the Sephardi Museum. The central hall is the quite spectacular synagogue itself. The sculpted plaster decorations all round and the Hebrew inscriptions along the walls testify to a wealthy Jewish community. Maria La Blanca, just down the road, is very different but equally impressive.

In Toledo's Cathedral, there is a plaque triumphantly describing the great achievement of *los reyes Catolicos* - the expulsion of the Jews — in terms of nothing less than undiminished pride. This plaque is simply one more indication, if any need be sought, of how differently Jews and Catholics regard this event. In the West (except for Spain) Isabella and Ferdinand are regarded as fanatic and intolerant despots, and the Inquisition as a sort of precursor to the Holocaust. In Spain, Isabella and Ferdinand are regarded as heroes, and spoken of with unbridled admiration to this day.

### Monday (day 2) — Toledo

Most museums and other tourist spots in Spain are closed on Mondays, so we used this day for walking around Toledo and recovering from the trip. We spent most of the next Monday (day 10) on the road between Seville and Caceres.

### Tuesday (day 3) — Toledo - Cordoba

We visited the Toledo synagogues on Tuesday morning before setting out on the long ride to Cordoba.

#### CORDOBA

Cordoba is the best-preserved of Spain's Moorish cities. In fact, much of its Roman wall is still standing. The narrow medieval streets of the Barrio de la Judería retain their names to this day. In the Calle de los Judios stands the Maimonides synagogue, built a hundred years after the great scholar's death in Egypt, and named for him in commemoration of the fact that he was born only a few doors down the street. The meaning of the synagogue's cryptic inscriptions remains a mystery.

A statue of Maimonides stands just down the street, in front of the house where he is said to have been born, the most famous son of a city whose streets are lined with orange trees. There isn't a word on the commemorative plaque explaining why Maimonides' family left Cordoba; they were in fact fleeing the fanatical Almohad dynasty that forcibly imposed Islam on the city's Jews and Christians.

Adjacent to the Judería is Cordoba's most spectacular sight — the Mosque. Though formally a cathedral, the *Mesquita* is an imposing monument of Islamic Spain, second only to the Alhambra in Granada, and illustrates many of the differences between the Moslem and Christian world views. As a mosque, the building opened into a huge courtyard of orange trees. The Christians sealed the many exits to the courtyard and transformed the light and airy mosque into a dark and gloomy place.

You can spend a long time wandering among the more than eight hundred pillars — literally a forest of colored marble — that grace the enormous hall.

### **Wednesday (day 4) — Cordoba - Granada**

#### **GRANADA**

Granada was the last Moslem city conquered by the Christian kings, some 250 years after the other important cities in Andalusia (Cordoba and Seville). If there is one sight in Spain that it an absolute “must see,” it is the Alhambra Palace. It cannot be described. It must be seen to be understood. Nowhere in Spain is the contrast between Moor and Christian more striking. The Fountain of the Lions was donated to the Moslem King by the Jewish community shortly before the city’s conquest in 1492. It was in the Alhambra that the Edict of Expulsion was signed. Here Rabbi Isaac Abravenel pleaded in vain with Ferdinand and Isabella to rescind the edict, and here Christopher Columbus was granted the charter to set off across the Atlantic in search of India. A grandiose statue in the town below the Alhambra commemorates this event.

### **Thursday - Sunday (days 5-8) — Granada - Gibraltar**

#### **GIBRALTAR**

Gibraltar, a 4-5 hour drive from Granada along the Costa del Sol, is home to a flourishing Jewish community of some 600 people (out of some 40,000 Gibraltans), with four active synagogues (all Orthodox), several kosher groceries and a kosher restaurant (glatt kosher, no less!). It’s a good mid-point for a trip: you can spend a very pleasant Shabbat here and stock up with kosher food for the remainder of the trip. Gibraltar’s main tourist attraction is a trip up to the top of the rock, a precarious drive for the adventurous (seriously consider a guided tour).

Gibraltar’s Jews arrived after Britain took “the rock” from Spain in the early eighteenth century. One of the Spain’s treaty conditions was that no Jews be allowed to live there, but Britain ignored this clause and allowed Jewish merchants from Morocco to enter the colony and establish what eventually became today’s very vibrant community.

The Nefusot Yehuda synagogue (65 Line Wall Road, just down the street from the restaurant and Community Center) is a beautiful example of Moorish-Jewish architecture and should not be missed. For current information, contact the Jewish Community Center at 10 Bomb House Lane before you leave.

### **Sunday (day 8) — Gibraltar - Seville**

#### **SEVILLE**

It was from Seville that the fanatic Dominican friars spread their hate through Spain, pillaging and murdering those whose only crime was their loyalty to the religion of their ancestors. From Seville too, the merciless arm of the Inquisition struck down the recent converts to the religion of their tormentors, torturing

them and confiscating their property to build ever more resplendent palaces for the clerical orders whose members had piously undertaken vows of poverty.

Seville’s enormous cathedral, with its imposing Moorish Giralda tower and tacky cenotaph to Columbus, is a testament to the terrifying power of Church and Crown in Spain. To Seville flowed the enormous wealth (“all the silver in Potosí”) plundered by the Spanish *conquistadores* from the unfortunate natives of America. The tobacco factory made famous by Bizet’s Carmen is here too, today a university. Seville’s former riches are apparent everywhere.

Like the other Andalusian cities, Seville has its Judería, parts of which are the most exclusive areas of the city. There is a Calle de los Judios. In the north of the Judería stands the Church of Santa Maria La Blanca, built on the site of a synagogue. There is a tiny Jewish community, mostly immigrants from South America.

### **Monday (day 9) — Seville - Caceres**

#### **CACERES**

Caceres is in the remote western part of the country, in an area aptly called “Extremadura.” It’s a long ride north from Seville, through a wild countryside of mountains and lakes.

Caceres’ old city has not changed in hundreds of years, and more important, has not been taken over by the tourist industry. There are no souvenir shops, no horse-drawn carriages and no hordes of Japanese tourists and their noisy cameras. Everything is exactly as it was in medieval times.

Walking along the dark stone-paved streets of old Caceres at night, it’s not difficult to imagine what it must have felt like to hear footsteps behind you: someone carrying a torch, perhaps; a few wide-eyed monks, on their way to set fire to someone’s house, the frenzied mob behind them chanting, relishing the night’s prospects of raping and looting. In Caceres, you can really feel the terror of the approaching pogrom.

The Church of San Antonio, in the south of the old town, was formerly a synagogue. Step inside. It may be the only church in Christendom with a women’s gallery.

### **Tuesday-Thursday (days 10-12) — Caceres, Segovia and Madrid**

The rest of our trip was in Castille, the north central part of Spain, and included short visits to:

- **Avila** (the home of St. Theresa, a nice Jewish girl) — its imposing city wall was built in only nine years by a population determined to prevent the return of the Moslems
- **Segovia** — an intact Roman aqueduct and the church where Isabella was crowned
- **Escorial** — an impressive library and the tacky tombs of Spain’s later royals

- **Madrid** — a Calle de la Sinagoga renamed to Calle del Fé and an unmarked Inquisitorial torture center

There's very little of Jewish interest in any of these places. One exception: the small town of Hervas, not far from Caceres. At the entrance to Hervas is the Hotel Sinagoga. A wall plaque in the Calle de Rabiner proclaims the town's importance to the Spanish-Jewish Friendship Society. Much of the population is descended from *conversos*, but there are few outward signs of this.

## Miscellaneous

### Kosher Food

In *Candide*, Voltaire tells of two travelers "who, whilst eating a chicken, had put the bacon that went with it on the edges of their plates" and so were arrested by the Inquisition and burnt at the stake the next day. Indeed, for hundreds of years, Spaniards made a point of conspicuously eating pork to prove to each other that they were good Christians. The result is that everything in Spain is cooked with pork, so almost no food processed in Spain is kosher.

There are only a few places in Spain where you can get kosher food:

- from the small Jewish communities in the large cities (Madrid, Barcelona)
- in the kosher stores of Gibraltar and Malaga  
The kosher restaurant in Gibraltar may be able to arrange for Shabbat meals at your hotel.

The availability of kosher food in Spain is a fluid state of affairs. There is now, for example, an Orthodox community and rabbi in Torremolinos (near Marbella). Many of the hotels in Marbella are Jewish-owned.

### Shopping

The only sort of thing you might want to get in Spain is local craft, things like:

- in Toledo, suits of armor (no kidding, but you may have to buy another ticket on the plane to take it home) and Toledañas (they are small and cute; ask for them at the tourist shops)
- in Andalusia, leather goods, bullfighting paraphenalia, and for the flamenco dancers among you, castanets and flowing flowery dresses
- in Cordoba, Moorish-style *tchachkas* (for example, elaborately framed mirrors)
- everywhere, pottery and painted tiles

## Other Interesting Places

Some worthwhile places to visit which we saw on other trips to Spain:

- **Mijas** — Overlooking the Costa del Sol just west of Malaga, this charming *peueblo blanco* has many small shops selling local craft objects.
- **Marbella** — A former fishing village, today transformed into a very *chic* tourist town. Marbella's beaches (like those all along the Costa del Sol) are clean and well-kept. A great place to while away a few weeks.

The flamenco club in the immaculate old town's San Cristo Plaza offers the real thing. Catch the midnight show, but pass on the CD the guitarists peddle to tourists afterwards.

- **Puerto Banus** — Just west of Marbella, its port is a magnet for the magnificent yachts of the rich and famous. Its expensive quayside shops (\$100 designer T-shirts) stay open to midnight in season.
- **Ronda** — An hour's drive from the coast along a winding mountain road, Ronda was the center of the last Moslem revolt. Legend has it that Jews and Moslems were flung to their deaths by the mob from the bridge spanning the town's steep gorge.

## Statistics

hotel nights	11
distance traveled	2000 kilometers