

#TRAVEL

Visiting Córdoba, a pearl of Muslim Spain

Once the capital of both the Moorish Kingdom and the Roman Empire, Córdoba is one of the three cities in Andalusia that are known as the "Pearls of Muslim Spain." The other two are Seville and Alhambra in Granada. During a recent visit to Spain, my wife and I went on a day trip to Córdoba.

After entering the city through the historic arch called Puerta del Puente, we were mesmerised by the sight of La Mezquita, the great mosque of the Umayyad Caliphate and one of the most iconic images of Spain.

The site of the mosque was originally home to a Roman temple, which was later replaced by a church named Visigoth Basilica of San Vicente. When the Moors conquered Andalusia in 711, they purchased half of the church for the Muslim community's Friday prayers.



Córdoba in 1236, they consecrated the mosque and turned it into a cathedral but kept it largely unaltered. Its ecclesiastical name is The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption. That is why the mosque is also referred to as "Mezquita-Catedral." As it now stands, Spanish authorities and the Vatican would not allow Muslims to pray in the mosque.

The entrance to the mosque is artistically decorated with gold and multi-coloured motifs. However, visitors flock to see the majesty of the quiet and expansive interior of the mosque, which is considered to be a photographer's dream.

Once inside, one can see an elegant combination of Moorish and Christian architectural styles. It is based on a double arch, the lower one horseshoe-shaped and the upper one semi-circular. The alternate brick and stone in the arches, creating the red and white striped pattern, gives a unity and distinctive character to the whole design.

Sunlight streams in through windows in the four cupolas creating interesting effects combined with light from the hundreds of small oil lamps.

At La Mezquita, the Mihrab, a semi-circular niche that indicates the qibla (direction of the Kaaba in Mecca), is a masterpiece of architectural art. Carved from a single block of marble, it is

embellished with geometric and flowing designs of plants, as well as inscriptions of verses from the Quran.

Unlike mosques elsewhere, the Mihrab is not orientated southeast toward Mecca. Instead, it points south toward Damascus in Syria. Above the Mihrab is an equally dazzling dome, which is built of crisscrossing ribs that create pointed arches all lavishly covered with gold mosaic in a radial pattern.

For good reasons, La Mezquita is considered one of the jewels of Islamic civilization in the Western world. It is an indicator of the cosmopolitan, sophisticated culture that flourished here more than a millennium ago when Córdoba was the capital of Islamic Spain.

Even by today's standards, this impressive building is one of the biggest mosques in the world. Indeed, La Mezquita is to Córdoba what the Alhambra Palace is to Granada. From our perspective, visiting La Mezquita was a memorable part of the trip to this wonderful Andalusian city!

The other historic landmark of Córdoba is the Roman Bridge. Built across the Guadalquivir River after Caesar's victory over Pompey the Great, it is the main legacy of the Roman period in this historic city. The bridge has been reconstructed at various times since. The city centre of Córdoba with the bridge and the river as companions forms a scene of incomparable postcard-worthy beauty.

Besides the mosque and the bridge, the labyrinth of bewitching narrow streets of Córdoba, with colourful flowers hanging from wrought iron balconies, are remarkable sights. One such street is the alluring Little Street of Flowers, symbolising the beauty of the Old Quarter. We stood at one end of the street, admiring the blooming flower pots hooked to the walls of the apartments with the minaret of La Mezquita, now the belfry of the Cathedral, in the background.

Many homes in the city have large interior courtyards with picturesque

gardens. The resplendent tiles and arches of the buildings speak loudly of the Moorish influence in the architecture of the city, while the courtyards and the twisting alleys, which remain cloaked in shadow for a better part of the day, provide the much-needed shade to the residents during the dog days of summer.

Situated at the heart of Córdoba is Judería, the old Jewish Quarter. The unassuming quarter is of tremendous historical importance. The indication that once upon a time there was a Jewish population in Córdoba is a synagogue. The front of the synagogue is adorned by the statue of Moses Maimonides, a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher, scholar, preeminent astronomer and physician who was born in Córdoba in 1135.

Another amazing attraction of Córdoba is the orange trees lined on both sides of the streets. Bitter oranges, as they are called, are fruits emblematic of this southern city. As we walked along the narrow alleyways, we could smell the ambrosial aroma of these ornamental fruits wafting through the air.

A final thought on Córdoba — we found the city to be a historical mix of Moorish, Gothic and Jewish architecture, with La Mezquita hinting at an enlightened period when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived side by side and enriched their city with a heady interaction of diverse and vibrant cultures. Even today, the city lives in the shadow of its monumental past.

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Given the fervour of the times, using the church as a place of worship by both Muslims and Christians was an extraordinary act of tolerance.

In 785, on the orders of Abd al-Rahman I, the then Emir of Córdoba, the church was destroyed and the mosque that we see today was erected with extensions in the 9th and 10th centuries by his successors, ultimately making it one of the largest sacred buildings in the Islamic world.

When the Christians reconquered

