

Romantic Seville

Full of history and excitement

> By Habeeb Salloum

I was exhausted as I laboured up the last few steps of La Giralda - the Moorish tower of Seville's Gothic Cathedral, Seville's most outstanding monument and the symbol of the city. The steeple of Spain's most massive cathedral - the third largest in the world - it is the loftiest church tower in Spain. The cathedral was built on the foundations of the former Great Mosque of Seville and has been a mecca, for centuries drawing millions of tourists to Seville whose historic structures, have been a lasting reminder of the Moors and their architecture,

Struggling up the 97 m (318 ft) high former minaret of the city's once Great Mosque, it seemed the sky was near before I reached its top. Spent and weary, I clutched the side of the railing and, in the dwindling twilight, surveyed the surrounding panorama.

Below, the Patio de los Naranjos of blossoming orange trees, once the original Mosque's courtyard, brought back memories of the Moors. All around the courtyard the mosque's other remaining parts such as arches, doors and sections of walls, now integrated into the cathedral, were clearly visible. In the distance, on all sides, the vivid colours of the skyline, dotted with the towering steeples of innumerable churches - many former minarets of mosques - created a delightful picture of an oriental town. It seemed that any minute the Moors would appear to make the picture complete.

The oldest and richest of the cities in Andalusia with an aristocratic history, Seville is a coquettish-cosmopolitan urban centre of some 1,300,000 - Spain's fourth largest city and the capital of Andalusia. Before and during Roman times it was an important urban centre, but it reached its age of splendour under the Moors. They called it 'Ishbiliya' (an Arabized form of Seville) and it became a dazzling metropolis and the home of kings, musicians, poets and men of letters. The Christians recaptured the city in 1248, and it subsequently lost its importance for some centuries. However, after the discovery of the Americas, Seville again became



Barrio de St. Cruz

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important, controlling, for many decades, the trade with the New World. The wealth this generated made the city one of the richest urban centres on earth and an important commercial and intellectual centre - a position it retains today.

Nevertheless, the illustrious monuments in the older section of town are almost all the legacy of the Moors. From among these, even more imposing than La Giralda, is the Alcázar, Seville's fabulous 14th century Moorish palace. It was once a palace of the Moorish kings rebuilt in 1360 by Muslim Mudéjar craftsmen from Granada for Peter the Cruel of Castile. In the midst of rooms adorned with sayings from the Qur'an in beautiful Arabic-Kufic script, set in the finest Mudéjar architecture in Spain, Peter the Cruel, surrounded by his Moorish bodyguards, was entertained by Arab dancers and poets.

The lavishly decorated patio and surrounding chambers incorporate some of the finest examples of Spanish Muslim art, reminding

the visitor of Granada's famous Alhambra. On the outside, its vast well-groomed Moorish-style gardens of shrubs and climbing plants overflow with a profusion of jasmine, lemon, myrtle and orange flowers, giving the palace a 'Thousand and One Nights' setting. Under the shadow of its Moorish arches and arabesque brickwork, the pageant of the Barrio de Santa Cruz unfolds, inviting by its irresistible sirens calls.

The exquisite Barrio is a reminder from the Moorish age. The most intriguing part of the city, it consists of a tangled mosaic of narrow streets and cobbled alleyways. Usually the visitor's first stop, it is a delightful section of town in which one can glory in the city's Moorish past.

There is an Andalusian saying that 'Who hasn't seen Seville, has seen no wondrous thing'; and one can go on to say that 'they who have not visited that city's Barrio de Santa Cruz have not really travelled to Seville'. In this part of town one can sympathize with al-Mu'tamid, the Moorish poet king of Seville

who was exiled by the Almoravides conquerors, pining away for his beautiful city. That quarter's orange-scented streets; wrought-iron lanterns, casting shadows on gleaming white-washed walls; ochre-framed windows hiding behind exquisite grills; and flower-filled tiny plazas have, for centuries, ensnared visitors with their haunting charm. Known as the Jewish Quarter, the Barrio became their ghetto after the Christian conquest in 1247 - hence its name. Stretching from Alcázar on the east to Calle Santa María de Blanca on the west, it is all that remains of the Moorish layout of Seville. As in Muslim times, the Barrio is densely populated. It boasts some of the city's most expensive real estate, reflected in meticulously maintained white-sparkling homes, strung along its meandering minuscule avenues.

Located under the shadows of the city's famous La Giralda and Alcázar Palace, the quarter is a labyrinth of exotic and clean tiny streets, edged by Moorish



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Giralda

جيرالدا



Plaza de America

ساحة أمريكا

influenced palaces and monuments. In-between, its charming plazas strewn with geraniums, ivy, jasmine and orange trees, fill the alleyways with their intoxicating fragrances. Amid these legacies of the Arabs, enterprising merchants have established antique and artisan shops, cafes and souvenir outlets that cater to the thousands of daily tourists.

To the back of these pedestrian-friendly streets, the residential homes, bordering the quiet alleys are neat and pleasing to the eye. Once behind these brilliantly whitewashed houses, barricaded with iron grills, girls were kept chaste, so it is said.

The Barrio can be explored in a few hours of leisurely meandering or more preferably, to savour its delights, in a few days. The quarter's appealing Moorish aura usually ensures that visitors will not want to leave. Most travellers frequently linger in-between tourist sites, stopping in comfortable coffeehouse and fine restaurants that cover ▶



View of Seville

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every inch of the Barrio.

A memorable way to begin exploring Barrio de Santa Cruz is to start from near the Cathedral, beginning at Plaza de los Reyes. One can explore the most important sites of the Barrio by walking a circular tour starting at Calle Mateos Gago, then moving along to Calles, Mesón del Moro, Santa Teresa and Callejón del Agua. After the Palacio Arzobispal, noted for its fine patio and staircase of jasper, one should stop at the Cervería Giralda that incorporates parts of a Moorish bathhouse.

At the beginning of Mesón del Moro, another Arab bathhouse is now the San Marco Pizzeria and to the left are the Convento de José, a former 14th century palace containing excellent Mudéjar plasterwork and the Church of Santa María la Blanca which has built into its south wall the former entrance to the original synagogue in the Barrio.

Past Murillo's home, now housing the works of that famous Sevillian painter, lies Plaza Santa Cruz, one of the Barrio's much described squares. Under its greenery and flowers important Sevillians are buried.

From the next-door Jardines de Murillo, a pleasant oasis of tiled benches and lofty trees, one can stroll down Callejón del Agua, edged by magnificent mansions and patios then stop at Corral del Agua for a fine meal in a courtyard, covered with blooming flowers.

The nearby Plaza de Doña Elvira is the most charming of the Barrio's plazas. Its orange trees and exquisitely tiled benches are edged by La Cueva a colourful rambling restaurant as well as with artisan shops and attractive buildings. In the evenings, young men under perfume-defusing orange trees play their guitars, no doubt hoping to capture some lady's attention.

A minute's walk away is the Hospital de los



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Venerables, featuring an exquisite azulejo patio and the nearby Plaza Alianza. Here, one can have a coffee in the shadows of orange trees and bougainvillea before walking to Alcázar and exploring its vast well-groomed ▶



Torre del Oro

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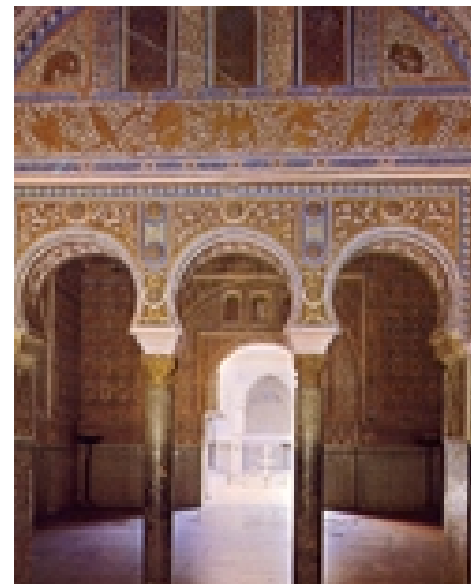
Moorish-style gardens, which, no doubt, made Seville famous during the days of Moorish Spain and in the ensuing years. Travellers can rest under the garden's shady trees and think of their meanderings in Barrio de Santa Cruz. It was a fitting climax to the Barrio's quaint winding streets, charming whitewashed homes festooned with flowering plants, spectacular patios, secluded plazas filled with orange trees and, above all, intoxicating Moorish atmosphere. From this Moorish section, it is only a short

distance to the imposing Plaza del EspaZa with its twin spires dominating the skyline and the nearby María Luisa Park - a large expanse of manicured greenery. Full of flowers, tiled pools and fountains set amid towering trees, this park has, in the main, been responsible for the labelling of Seville as 'City of Gardens'. Hidden amid the park's colours are the Archaeological Museum, housing an impressive collection of pre-Roman and Roman treasures; and the nearby Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, located in a



Alcazar-Inside

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splendid Mudéjar pavilion - two places not to be missed, especially by first-time visitors. If travellers have time to spare, there are countless other sites they can explore. Including are the twelve-sided Torre de Oro, once a part of the Moorish fortification and now a Naval Museum; Pilate's House, an outstanding example of Mudéjar architecture; and dozens of other historic palaces and churches. For many, overshadowing all these tourist spots are the colourful fairs and festivals ▶



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making the city a tourist delight. Commencing on Palm Sunday and continuing until Good Friday, Holy Week is celebrated by never-ending processions of endless floats carrying jewel-adorned and garlanded statues of the Virgin followed by bands and members of over 100 brotherhoods dressed in their eerie slit-eyed conical hats and black robes. Day and night, the heart-rending cries of saetas (songs of sorrow) and improvised flamenco laments of those watching can be heard echoing throughout the city.

A few days after Holy Week comes the six-day April Fair held in a vast canvas town. Hundreds of kiosks and pavilions, decorated with flags, flowers and lanterns, at night brightly illuminated, give the tent-fairground a seductive air. Amid this colour are held picturesque parades featuring magnificent stallions mounted by couples dressed in traditional Andalusian finery. During the festivities, the foremost bullfights, highlighted by the top matadors of the season, are held. Year after year, masses of people come from all parts of Spain and beyond to join in the revelry. Hence, it is very important for visitors to make hotel reservations long before the events take place. The excitement, drama and delights of Seville, especially during its fairs and festivals, have inspired a good number of novels and plays. The most popular drama in Spanish literature Don Juan Tenorio's novel and opera 'Carmen', and the 'Barber of Seville' - all have some connection to that city. They have given it a world-wide reputation as a place of dark haired beauties, flowers, splendid processions, light-hearted gaiety and the halo of enchanted patios - all not figments of their authors' imaginations, but attributes of everyday Seville, much of which comes by way of the Moors. ■



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Muralla Al-Mohade

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