

Ronda in Spain

The land of legends, bandits and museums

By **DOMINICK A. MERLE**

RONDA, Spain - DNA scientists have recently announced that the bones in the massive Seville cathedral are, in fact, just as Sevillians have claimed all along, those of Christopher Columbus.



Granada view.

منظر لغرناطة.

Allegedly. There are a few other countries, the most vocal being Cuba and the Dominican Republic, who remain unconvinced, claiming they have the remains of the famed explorer. So poor soul Columbus must have either died several times or his skeleton is scattered here... and there...and there.

Throughout the southern region of Andalusia, several other "glamour cities" contain the burial sites of historical and

legendary figures—painter Picasso in Malaga, bullfighter Manolete in Cordoba and the last of the Catholic Monarchs in Granada. Nobody that famous was ever born or buried in the small town of Ronda. Oh, Orson Welles did live there for a time, Hemmingway wrote, drank and slept there often enough, and pop goddess Madonna once rented the small bullring to film a concert, but other than that, it's just a sleepy little town in Southern Spain, population about 35,000 and holding. And

that's why we selected it to be one of our stops—we simply wanted to visit a place we had never heard of before and was off the well-worn tourist trail.

Going against the advice in all of the guidebooks ("a half-day at best") we decided to spend two nights in Ronda as part of our tour that began in Seville and continued in a diamond-shaped arc to include Cordoba and Granada. Besides, how do the guidebook writers know what I like to do anyway? ➤

We were dazzled by the great cathedral in Seville, one of the largest in the world, along with the festivities and flavors in the Andalusian capital itself; astonished by the scope and grandeur of the Holy Cathedral Church in Cordoba, once the majestic Mosque of Cordoba, we were left again with our mouths agape at the sprawling 13th Century palace-citadel Alhambra in Granada. But it was a simple act by a sensitive man who touched our hearts in Ronda. More about him later.

Perched on a rocky bluff with sheer walls falling a dramatic 180 meters (600 feet), Ronda is politely unobtrusive in design, allowing the magnificent scenery to take center stage. And nature's star attraction is the plunging river gorge called El Tajo. On both sides of the ravine, houses seem to be clinging for their very survival, seemingly ready to slide down at the slightest push.

Because of this rugged terrain, Ronda was one of the last Moorish cities to fall to the Crusaders. An arched bridge, Puente Nuevo, crosses the gorge connecting the old Moorish quarters of the city, La Ciudad, with the newer section, El Mercadillo.

The bridge was hailed as an architectural marvel when it was constructed in the late 16th Century and many people fell to their deaths over the years, accidentally or otherwise, including the original architect during an inspection. Hemmingway described how prisoners were thrown alive into the ravine during the Spanish Civil War.

We stayed at the government-owned hotel, Parador de Ronda, on the edge of the gorge in El Mercadillo. The location allowed us to walk across the Puente Nuevo and explore the old Moorish quarters, a labyrinth of streets and alleyways, whitewashed houses with wrought-iron balconies.

In the center of the old quarter is the Iglesias de Santa Maria, which opens onto a large square. Like many churches in Andalusia, it is a reconstruction of a former mosque, in this case the Great Mosque of Ronda. The belfry has been constructed over an old minaret. Nearby is the Palacio de Mondragon, once the 14th Century home of Moorish King Abolemic, and well-preserved Arab baths from the same period.

Later that same day we drove through some



House in the mountains.

بيت في الجبل.



House on a gorge.

بيت على الحافة.

of the so-called "White Towns of Andalusia," a group of nearby mountain villages with houses whitewashed a thousand times. Some of the homes and businesses were carved right into the hills, while others looked like they were dropped from the sky, landing every-which-way, like a page from a fairytale. Back in Ronda that evening, my wife Susan and I and our tour guide Javier walked a few blocks from our hotel in the El Mercadillo area and into a tiny coffee shop called Flores, named, we were told, after a famous bandit of yesteryear. There was a framed photo behind the counter of a rooster, and since we often collect rooster memorabilia

on trips, it caught our eye.

Actually, it wasn't a very good picture, but nonetheless we asked the young man behind the counter, through Javier, if we could buy it as a memento. He acted a little embarrassed and said he didn't want to sell the photo, because he had become attached to it himself, but would make a copy for us and have it delivered to our hotel the next night, our final night. We thanked him and enjoyed our strong Spanish coffees. We were shortly on a first-name basis and the young counterman, Pedro, told us, with Javier translating that tapas, those delicious little snacks that Spaniards have mid-day ➤



Ronda balcony.

شرفة بروندا.



Seville square.

ساحة بأشبيلية.

or early evening, actually originated in Ronda. I'm sure he was sincere enough, but on a previous Spanish trip, I had heard the same claim being made in Toledo. So far, Cuba and the Dominican Republic have not jumped into this dispute.

On our final day, we visited the Plaza de Toros, the world's oldest bullring (1785), where Madonna managed to film a rock concert a few years back. It was quite a controversy, we were told, because although bullfights are rare in Ronda these days, the

bullring has become almost sacred, and having Madonna prance around seemed sacrilegious to many. It's still a hot item.

But while bullfights usually take place only once a year in Ronda, the ring is transformed into a huge flea market twice a month when Gypsies from throughout Andalusia bring their wares. Some of the best buys in all of Spain can be made here, many residents contend, and so far no one has complained about the use of the famed bullring as a flea market.

Our final stop was the Bandit Museum (Los

Bandoleros), dedicated to the romantic figures of yesteryear who were murderous cutthroats to some and Robin Hoods to others. Ronda and its mountainous terrain attracted many bandits because of the numerous cave-like hiding places. The most famous of all was El Tempranillo (The Early Bird) who made his first kill at age 13, allegedly robbed the rich and helped the poor until he was killed himself by another bandit in 1833 at the age of 28.

Back at the hotel that night, we headed for our final dinner. No sign of the rooster poster from Pedro. Halfway through the meal, a hotel employee came to our table carrying a picture and a note. It was the rooster, frame and all, and the note was from Pedro. Translated, it said he wanted us to have the picture after all, as a gift.

Today, the rooster has a perch of honor in our home. It is one of our most cherished possessions of the mementos we have collected from around the world.

So Ronda may not have Columbus, or Picasso, or Manolete. But make it more than a half-day trip, if you go. And look for Pedro, a young man with a sensitive soul who touched our hearts.

(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO:

We flew Iberia Airlines from New York JFK to Madrid, connecting to Seville. Other airlines servicing Spain include American, Continental and Delta.

No visa is required for U.S. or Canadian passport holders for stays of up to three months. No vaccines are required.

Adjust your stomachs for late dining. Lunch is usually from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and dinner from 9:30 p.m. to 1 a.m. Spaniards are as intense about their food as they are about flamenco and bullfighting.

Light, informal attire is acceptable in most restaurants and public places. Service charges are included in most bills, but an additional five to ten percent is common practice. ■

For further information on Spain and help on planning your trip, try the websites www.okspain.org or www.spain.info