

Charmed by Málaga

We loved our recent trip to Málaga, a 2800 year old city on the southern Mediterranean coast of Spain and birthplace of Pablo Picasso. Málaga especially captivated us because of the beauty, variety, and history of the Andalucía region, and because Málaga itself is a smaller, more intimate city than Madrid or Barcelona. We stayed at the Hotel Atarazanas – a nice hotel on the western edge of the old city and across from the central market. It was an easy walk from the hotel to many points of interest, and most importantly, there were at least five good bakeries and a churros café within five minutes. Notably, much of central Málaga is pedestrian only and populated with an endless number of restaurants. It was so nice to dine outdoors and people watch, but one should avoid the outer tables accessible to the few but persistent beggars.

On our first evening, we enjoyed a walking tour with our guide Victor Garrido. Ironically, we met near a bronze statue of Hans Christian Andersen who also loved Málaga. We walked through the central market, several historical plazas, past many tapas bars, the old Roman amphitheater, the old mountain top fort and palace, and other sites reflecting the footprints of the Phoenicians, Romans, Visigoths and Moors. Victor detailed Málaga's Revolutionary War connections. He showed us the central cathedral which has one of its two towers unfinished, supposedly because the funds were used to help the U.S. against Britain. Victor further told us about Bernardo de Gálvez who made significant contributions to the U.S.'s fight for independence and after whom Galveston, TX is named. Victor also took us into a building belonging to one of the many fraternal organizations which build and maintain huge, ornate floats that were carried through the streets during recent the Holy Week festivals. The float was lavishly decorated with a fortune in silver. And we learned that the squeaking car tires we heard were from the candle wax from all the candles used during Holy Week.

We spent much of our Málaga stay visiting historical and beautiful sites within a few hours of Málaga. We took day trips to Ronda, Seville, Granada, and Tangier, Morocco. Ronda was our first day trip. This photogenic city is famous for the deep gorge dividing the city, and the massive old stone bridge spanning the gorge. The city is on the edge of an escarpment offering grand vistas of the farms below. Bullfighting is very important in that region of Spain, and the city's sizeable bullfighting arena is testament to several famous matadors from Ronda.

Arguably, our trip to Tangier was our most unique experience. A bus took us past the sheer cliff face of the Rock of Gibraltar to the ferry to Tangier out of Tarifa. In Tangier, we met our local guide who wore a silk suit, was well educated, but surprisingly, was missing most of his back teeth like many people we encountered in Tangier. It was our first visit to a Muslim country, and so it was fascinating to see the great variety of dress from very traditional to very western. A snake charmer, camel rides, and a wonderful lunch at a traditional Moroccan restaurant were all part of the experience. But our most lasting memory will be the intensity of the vendors, especially those in the narrow lanes of the Kasbah. The vendors selling scarves, watches jewelry, tee shirts, etc. were so numerous that we could barely get past them. They would not take no for an answer and were not above hounding a person for a block before giving up. We also noticed an abundance of cats which our guide explained as due to a reverence for cats.

On our visit to Seville we stopped at the Plaza de España which is a large beautiful semicircular building and plaza constructed for a 1929 exposition. It was the set for the British HQ in

Lawrence of Arabia when Lawrence returns from the desert, and was also used in two Star Wars films involving the Naboo. But the highpoint of the visit was seeing the tomb of Christopher Columbus in the main cathedral. His remains have been verified by doing DNA testing and comparing with that from the known body of his son. Then too, we marveled at the mile after mile of mountain to mountain olive trees on the road to Seville.

Of course the day trip that we had been waiting for was to Granada to see the Alhambra Palace. The extensive gardens, fountains, pools water features, intricate stone fretwork, and tile were incredible. Another fun memory was going to a small antique and coin shop. We bought a 19th century Spanish silver coin and a 1966 Francisco Franco coin as souvenirs. The owner spoke no English, but we enjoyed bargaining in our broken Spanish. And of course, we then sat at an outdoor café and ate a pastry before heading back to Málaga.

Our last day in Málaga we visited a glass museum in a large old house. Our guide and co-owner of the museum was an older English gentleman from minor aristocracy who had been collecting for many years. Some of the museum's pieces date back thousands of years and were produced by dipping a clay form into molten glass and then removing the clay. He gave a detailed history of making glass products, and the collection contained many beautiful plates, bowls, glasses, and purely artistic objects. Interestingly, we learned that the glass business in Britain was hit hard in WW I when many of the skilled artisans went off to war and never came back.

We did meet very nice people everywhere on our trip. One couple stands out especially. They were from Inverness, Scotland. It was humorous that when we told them we were originally from Iowa, they immediately said "American Pickers" – one of their favorite shows along with "Pawn Stars."

Bruce and Janis Robinson, June 2015

Photos available at brucejanistravel.shutterfly.com