

March 5, 2005

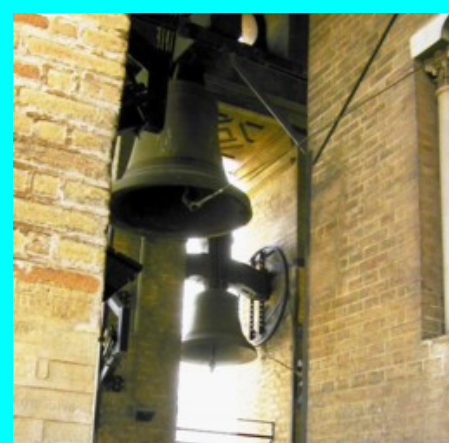
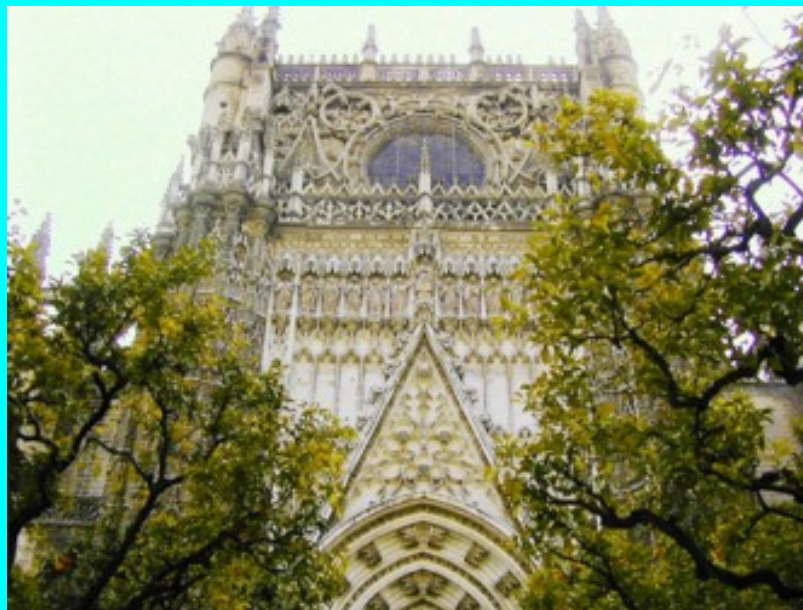
We had a fantastic trip to Spain. We rented a car and visited some of Spain’s most monumental and beautiful sights in the historic Spanish cities of Seville (Sevilla), Granada, Toledo, Madrid, and Cordoba. The richness of Spain’s history and culture could be seen throughout. It was an amazing ten day trip. If there was any “downside”, it was that we ended up traveling during one of the coldest weeks ever recorded for this time of year in Europe. Much of the time we had on five layers of clothing. On the bright side, though, we encountered mostly partly cloudy to sunny days on our trip with only one day of rain and/or snow, whereas back in Lagos while we were gone they had mostly rain, their first major rain all winter.

We left Wednesday morning, Feb. 23, and drove to Sevilla. Sevilla was one of Spain’s most captivating Spanish cities; we were amazed by its beauty and ambiance. We spent three nights in Sevilla, and while there we stayed at La Hosteria del Laurel, a small charming hotel right in the heart of the Santa Cruz district (Barrio de Santa Cruz), the old Jewish quarter (Juderia) of Sevilla. Our hotel was located right in the heart of Old Sevilla, and all major sights were within easy walking distance. Adding to the atmosphere, the old streets of Barrio de Santa Cruz consisted of a maze of lanes and pathways. Confusing at first, afterwards it became lots of fun to walk around inside the labyrinth.



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On Thursday we visited Sevilla's cathedral, considered to be the largest Gothic church in the world and the third largest church in Europe after St. Peter's in Rome and St. Paul's in London. The interior of the church was awesome, and inside one of the cathedral's entrances was the tomb of Christopher Columbus. Like many churches in both Spain and Portugal, when the Reconquest Christians retook the land from the Moors, all mosques were razed and Christian churches put in their place. That was the case here in Sevilla. The Giralda tower of the cathedral was the only part of the original mosque to remain. Originally a Moorish minaret used to call Muslims to prayer, after the Reconquest it became the cathedral's bell tower. Since the tower was first used to call Muslims to prayer, the climb to the top was via a spiraling ramp instead of stairs. In the Islamic days a man on horseback would gallop up five times a day to call Muslims to prayer; now it made for an easy walk up to the top of the tower by tourists. Once on top, we had great views of the city.



Later that afternoon we walked to Plaza de Espana containing the beautiful Spanish Pavilion from the 1929 Expo, and in the evening we attended the two-hour flamenco show at Los Gallos. As the show was put on in a very small theater, we were quite close to the action adding to the excitement of the evening. Afterwards, we walked by the cathedral, now all lit up and looking so magical.



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On Friday, we visited the Basilica de la Macarena containing the much revered Weeping Virgin statue, and in the small museum next to the church we saw two of the floats used during Sevilla’s Holy Week processions, considered the grandest in all of Spain. Next we toured the Plaza de Toros, Sevilla’s 200 year old bullfighting arena. Especially interesting to see were the off-limit areas to the public during fight days. The bullfighting season begins Easter Sunday, and people were already purchasing their tickets.



Later in the day we visited Real Alcazar de Sevilla, still used today as a royal palace when King Juan Carlos is in Sevilla. This palace, built by Moorish craftsmen under Christian rule in the mid-14th century, was Mudejar in style, blending Christian motifs with Moorish designs. When Columbus returned from his discovery of the New World, he was debriefed at this palace by Queen Isabel.

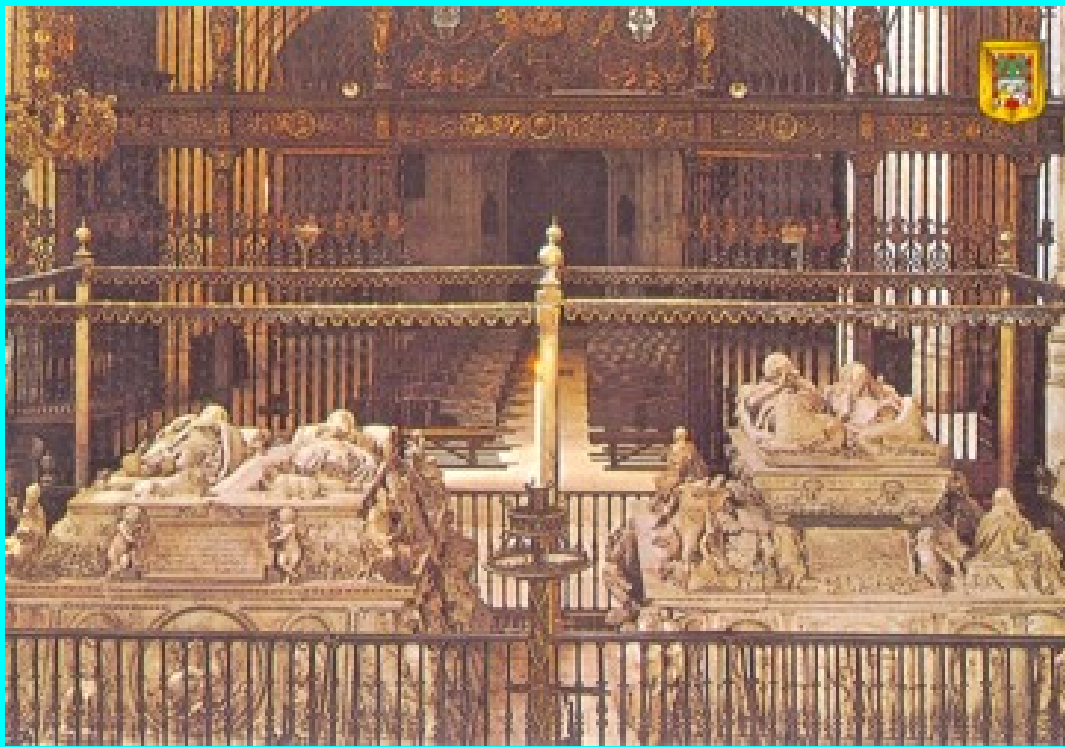


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Saturday morning we departed Sevilla for Granada. As we drove along the highway, we saw row after row of olive trees along all the hillsides. With our arrival in Granada in the early afternoon, we had time to visit some sights before nightfall. With the sunny weather, the main plaza, Plaza Nueva, was alive with activity. Many college students were enjoying their school break in Granada. At times we felt like we were back in the era of the 60's with the attire of many of the college students.



Granada was the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, lasting 250 years longer than any other Spanish city. In 1492, with the conquest of Granada by the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, Spain became a united country. At this time, their desire to have Spain become a Catholic homogenous country resulted in the beginning of the Inquisition and the expulsion of both the Moors and Jews from Spain. Because of the important part that Granada played in the unification of Spain, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel had their royal chapel (Capilla Real) built here. At the front of this chapel rested their tombs plus also those of their daughter Juana and her husband Philip. After seeing this very lavish chapel we visited next-door the large Renaissance cathedral, the second-largest cathedral in Spain after Sevilla's. As it was so cold inside both the chapel and cathedral, we didn't linger long at either.



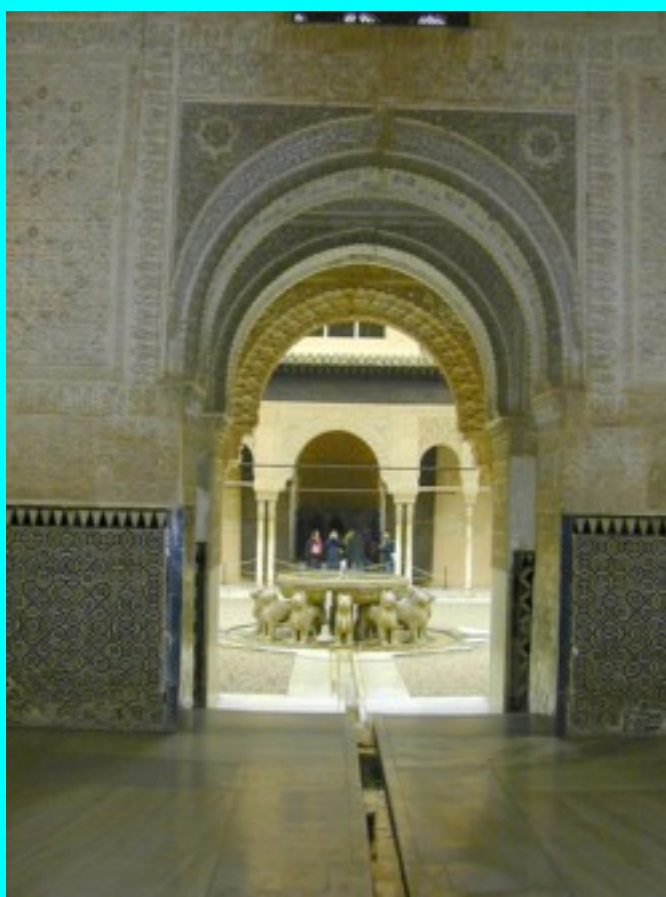
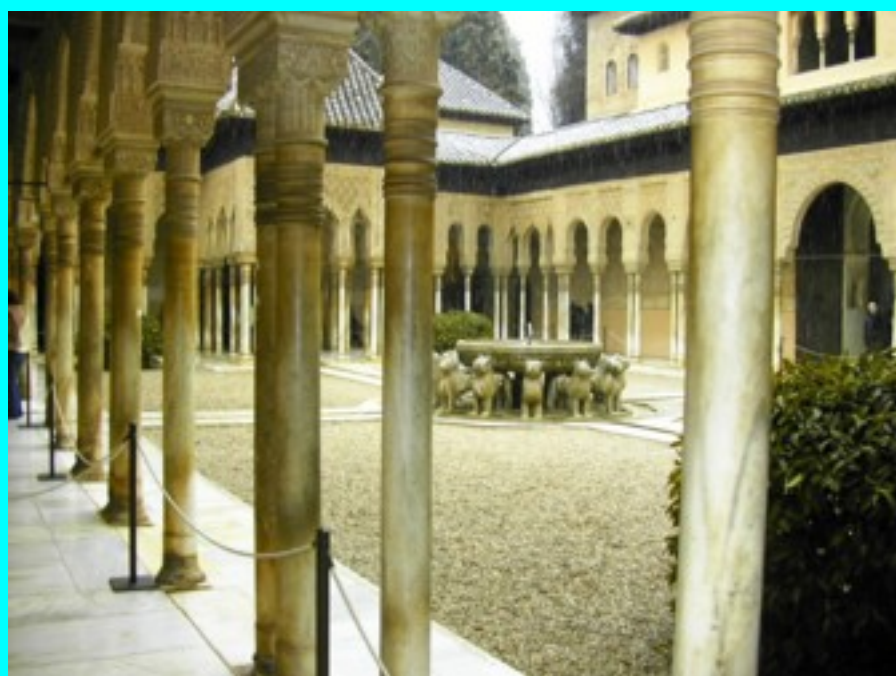
Tomb of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel

Afterwards we took the city minibus up to the San Nicolas church viewpoint for a beautiful view of the Alhambra and the snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountains in the background. When we arrived at the top, a festive atmosphere was already prevalent among the crowd of students and tourists. San Nicolas viewpoint was known as the place to be at sunset when the Alhambra supposedly glowed red. The Alhambra, the only Moorish palace fortress from the Middle Ages to remain intact in Europe, was now one of the main tourist attractions in Spain. Regrettably, the Alhambra on this evening didn't glow red. On our way back down to the main plaza, we walked through the "tangled" lanes of the old Moorish quarter Albayzin.



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During the night the weather changed. Instead of the blue sky of Saturday, we were greeted on Sunday by a mixture of snow and rain. Despite the weather, we still continued with our plans to see the magnificent Alhambra representing the peak of Moorish architectural achievement in Spain during the 13th and 14th centuries. The Alhambra consisted of three parts: the royal palace (Palacios Nazaries), the fort (Alcazaba), and the sultan's summer home and gardens (Generalife). Most spectacular was the palace. Unlike the Catholic church, Islam forbade human images. Instead, intricate and exquisite geometric and floral patterns and designs, combined with verses from the Koran, were created throughout all the rooms and areas of the palace. The effect was awe-inspiring.



Afterwards we walked down to the main plaza. Today no one was there due to the weather. What a difference from yesterday. Because of the rain, we observed a few sights in the late afternoon from inside the city's warm minibus. Noticeable in Granada were the large number of Gypsies, supposedly around 50,000. They came from India via Egypt during the 15th century. Our bus took us up to the Sacromonte district where most lived. Once back in town we walked through some of the tiny shopping lanes nearby the plaza; the smell of incense was prevalent.



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Monday we drove from Granada to Toledo. When we left Granada it was raining, and as we drove across the pass to Jaen, we encountered snow. Thankfully once in Jaen, the weather started to clear. Like on our drive to Granada from Sevilla, all the hills during the first part of our drive were covered with olive trees. As we drove out of the Andalucia region in the southern part of Spain and into the Castilla-La Mancha region, the terrain slowly changed. Now we were in Don Quixote country. We stopped briefly on the hillside just outside Consuegra, feeling the cold wind on our faces as we looked out over the landscape. Located on the hill with us were the ruins of a 12th century castle and 250 year old windmills once used to grind grain.



Toledo was impressive. This entire charming medieval city, located on a strategic hilltop, protected on three sides by the Tajo River and surrounded by ancient walls and gates, was now a world heritage site. Because of its strategic location, this city had been important throughout history: first to the Romans, then to the Visigoths, next to the Moors, and last to the Christians. Also, it was known as the city of three cultures: Christian, Moslem, and Jewish. For centuries, up until the time of the Inquisition, these cultures had coexisted peacefully, adding to the intellectual and artistic greatness of the city. Up until 1561, Toledo was both Spain's political and religious center. At that time, the political capital was moved to Madrid, but the religious center for the Catholic church continued to remain in Toledo.



Late Monday afternoon we visited Toledo's cathedral. Its interior was breathtaking, truly one of the most beautiful cathedrals. Once inside, all we could say was "wow." It was so impressive. Afterwards we "tried" to stroll along some of Toledo's narrow labyrinthine streets, but it was just too cold, especially due to the wind chill.



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The artist El Greco lived almost half his life in Toledo, and so some of his most famous paintings were located here. Tuesday morning we visited the Santa Cruz Museum displaying fifteen of his paintings, the most impressive being the Assumption of Mary. Afterwards, we visited the Chapel of Santo Tome containing El Greco's masterpiece, The Burial of the Count of Orgaz.

Before leaving Toledo, we visited once more the beautiful cathedral, walked some of Toledo's ancient lanes, and took a short historical tour of the city. We easily could have stayed another day in Toledo, but we were on a schedule and so continued to Madrid Tuesday afternoon.



Madrid, the capital of Spain, didn't have the long historic past of Toledo, Granada, and Sevilla. Its greatness started in the 1500's when it became the capital of Spain. Wednesday morning we visited Spain's National Royal Palace, considered one of Europe's great palaces. This lavishly furnished 18th century palace was exquisite. Because we happened to be at the palace on the first Wednesday of the month, we had the added treat of watching the monthly "changing of the guard." Excellent horsemanship was displayed throughout the entire pageantry.



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After enjoying tapas in Plaza Mayor, the 17th century main square of Madrid, we spent the remainder of the day at the Prado Museum, one of the world’s great art museums. This museum contained most of the exceptional art paintings accumulated by the Spanish monarchy. Here were housed the world’s greatest collection of Spanish paintings, and in addition, many Italian and Flemish masterpieces.



Thursday morning we drove an hour northwest of Madrid to visit the Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, built in the 16th century by the Catholic King Philip II. Housed here were the Spanish monarchs’ Royal Pantheon, plus a small palace, monastery, basilica, and library.



In the afternoon we headed south to Cordoba, arriving there by early evening. For 300 years, from the mid-8th to the early 11th centuries, Cordoba was the capital of the Islamic civilization in Spain. At that time it was one of the world’s largest and most cultured cities, a center for intellectual achievement. Located in Cordoba was the Mezquita, the grandest mosque ever built by the Moors in Spain. Our hotel was located right across from this architectural treasure



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Friday morning we visited the Mezquita. Begun in 786, it had been enlarged three times during the Muslim rule. Especially impressive were the large number of rose and blue marble columns found inside. When Cordoba was reconquered by the Christians in 1236, two small Christian chapels were built inside the original mosque. Then in the 16th century, an elaborate Christian cathedral was constructed in the center of the mosque, and many smaller chapels were affixed around the walls of the Mezquita. During the Muslim rule there had been 1013 columns, but with the changes by the Christians only 857 columns remained. All these diverse architectural and artistic changes created by two different religions over eight centuries made for a very striking display of beauty and contrast.

In the afternoon we drove back to Lagos, Portugal. We had traveled 1265 miles over ten days. During this time the history of Spain had come alive.

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