

Córdoba Information

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The Roman Bridge

Córdoba is a mid-sized city of 350,000 inhabitants and the capital of the province of Córdoba, situated in the centre of Andalucía in Spain. A great cultural reference point in Europe, this ancient city has been declared a World Heritage Site and contains a mixture of the diverse cultures that have settled it throughout history. Very few places in the world can boast of having been the capital of a Roman province (Hispania Ulterior), the capital of an Arab State (Al-Andalus) and a Caliphate. Such splendour is palpable in the intellectual wealth of this city that has seen the birth of figures like Seneca, Averroes, and Maimonides. The historic quarter of Córdoba is a beautiful network of small streets, alleys, squares and whitewashed courtyards arranged around the Mezquita, which reflects the city's prominent place in the Islamic world during medieval times.

Córdoba was founded by the Romans and due to its strategic importance as the highest navigable point of the Guadalquivir River, it became a port city of great importance, used for shipping Spanish olive oil, wine and wheat back to Ancient Rome. The Romans built the mighty bridge crossing the river, now called "El Puente Romano". But Córdoba's hour of greatest glory was when it became the capital of the Moorish kingdom of El-Andalus, and this was when work began on the Great Mosque, or "Mezquita", which, after several centuries of additions and enlargements, became one of the largest in all of Islam. When the city was reconquered by the Christians in 1236, the new rulers of the city were so awed by its beauty that they left it standing, building their cathedral in the midst of its rows of arches and columns, and creating the extraordinary church-mosque we see today. As well as the unique mosque-cathedral, Córdoba's treasures include the Alcázar, or Fortress, built by the Christians in 1328; the Calahorra Fort, originally built by the Arabs, which guards the Roman Bridge, on the far side of the river from the Mezquita, and the ancient Jewish Synagogue, now a museum. Córdoba's medieval quarter, once the home of the Jewish community, is called "La Judería" (The Jewry), a labyrinth of winding, narrow streets, shady flower-filled courtyards and picturesque squares such as La Plaza del Potro. In early May, homeowners proudly festoon their patios with flowers to compete for the city's "most beautiful courtyard" contest.

Once the largest city of Roman Spain, Córdoba later formed the heart of the western Islamic empire. Today, the city is a typical bustling, noisy Andalusian city, with lots of atmosphere, fascinating sites, intriguing small streets and shops and the inevitable fabulous choice of restaurants and bars.

The Mosque-Cathedral:

The Mezquita (Mosque) dates back to the 10th century when Córdoba reached its zenith under a new emir, Abd ar-Rahman III who was one of the great rulers of Islamic history. At this time Córdoba was the largest, most prosperous city of Europe, outshining Byzantium and Baghdad in science, culture and the arts. The development of the Great Mosque paralleled these new heights of splendour. Today the Mezquita de Córdoba (Córdoba Mosque) as it is commonly known (or the Córdoba-Cathedral as it now known by its

owners the Catholic Church) can be visited throughout the year for an entrance fee (of €8). Following a dispute between the church and the city over the name of the building in the 2010's it is now diplomatically called "Córdoba-Mosque Cathedral". The approach is via the Patio de los Naranjos, a classic Islamic ablutions courtyard which preserves both its orange trees and fountains. When the mosque was used for Moslem prayer, all nineteen naves were open to this courtyard allowing the rows of interior columns to appear like an extension of the tree with brilliant shafts of sunlight filtering through.

It's impossible to overemphasise the beauty of Córdoba's great mosque, with its remarkably serene (despite tourist crowds) and spacious interior. One of the world's greatest works of Islamic architecture, the Mezquita hints, with all its lustrous decoration, at a refined age when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived side by side and enriched their city with a heady interaction of diverse, vibrant cultures.

Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos:

The Alcázar (of the Christian Kings) features a castle, its delightful gardens and a Moorish bathhouse.

A Muslim Alcázar once stood where the Episcopal Palace is today - this building was reformed in the Baroque period and was recently reconditioned in order to house the Diocesan Museum. Alongside this museum, the Exhibition Palace occupied what used to be the Church of San Jacinto and the Hospital of San Sebastian, an outstanding construction opposite the Mosque featuring a portico that stands out among the Gothic jewels in Córdoba. Inside, in the Romero de Torres hall, one can admire interesting 16th century frescoes. Despite originating from the Christian era, these gardens are typically Moorish in design with ponds, fountains and aromatic plants. Adjacent to the gardens are the Royal Stables which extend to encompass the Gardens of the Campo Santo de los Mártires. The castle is almost a perfect square in plan of 4.100 square metres. It was rebuilt in 1327 by King Alfonso XI. His aim was to bring European Gothic architecture to the town. The castle walls connect the four (now three) corner towers by walkways or allures protected by battlements with prism shaped blocks. Within the Alcázar:

Lion Tower:

The North west tower is the oldest tower of all, square in shape it has two floors. There are wide Almohad-style bands on the four external sides. There is a roof terrace with battlements. Inside both floors have attractive crossed vaults and supporting arches. The name derives from one of the gargoyles which can be seen on the upper floor.

Tower of the Inquisition:

A circular tower in the south east corner of the Alcázar facing the river. The exterior stonework features ashlar blocks laid in different directions. Inside there are three floors and the rooms have semi-circular vaults.

Homage Tower or Keep:

The main tower is Octagonal in shape. This is where the occupants swore oaths to protect the fortress. On the top floor is the Reception Hall which has an attractive vaulted ceiling with ribs supported by capitals featuring vegetation sculptures. From the roof a smaller raised tower with a covered balcony proved the ideal place for the inquisition to carry out its public executions.

Tower of the Dove:

The tower, which no longer exists.

Royal Baths:

The Moorish style baths are situated in the basement and are fun to visit. They may well have been built by Alfonso XI. The first room is the changing room. The next three rooms are the Cold Room, the Warm Room and the Hot Room. There are skylights in groups of threes in the shape of stars which provide light and ventilation. The walls are made from hardened clay and some of the original marble floor slabs remain.

Mosaics Hall:

In a hall which housed the former chapel of the Inquisitions there are exhibited a magnificent collection of Roman mosaic art from the 2nd and 3rd century AD. The collection was discovered under Corredera Square in the city in 1959 and once belonged to a wealthy Roman Mansion.

Moorish Patio:

A rectangular patio, which is a fine example of Moorish architecture. There are motifs in Stucco around the base of the walls with drawings of castles and lions, and patterns.

Gardens:

Outside the main castle walls the gardens occupy 55.000 square metres. It is certainly a very relaxing place to wander. There is a wide variety of plants, palm trees, cypresses, orange and lemon, trees to be seen which overlook stone fountains and large ponds. Originally the water was brought in by an aqueduct from the Sierra Morena and the great Albolafia waterwheel in the River Guadalquivir nearby helped with the supply. The large ponds were added in the 19th century.

Plaza del Potro:

Just a few minutes away from the Mezquita, to the east along calle Luis de la Cerda/Lineros, is the Plaza del Potro (Square of the Colt), a long, rectangular square which slopes down towards the nearby Guadalquivir river to the south. It is named after the 16th-century fountain in the plaza (1577), an octagonal structure which features a small, prancing horse balanced atop a vase; the square used to host a livestock market dealing in equestrian. The medieval Posada del Potro, on the south side of the square, was a known haunt of adventurers and a favourite of Cervantes – he mentions it in Don Quixote. The writer lived in Córdoba as a child – his family moved there in 1553 from Valladolid, and stayed until 1557, living in called Sillerias, now called Romero Baros. He probably also stayed at the Posada. The inn, a typical corrala – two floors built around a narrow cobbled courtyard, the upper floor with a gallery and wooden pillars and balconies - has now been turned into a centre for the study of flamenco, the Centro Flamenco Fosforito, named after the famous singer Antonio Fernandez Diaz Fosforito. It stages exhibitions and seminars, as well as being used for other events. On the side of the plaza facing the inn, you'll find a converted 15th-century Franciscan charity hospital. This now contains two museums: the Museo Bellas Artes, and the Museo Julio Romero de Torres, the former home of the much-loved Córdoba painter.

Plaza de la Corredera:

This grand 17th-century square has an elaborate history as a site of public spectacles. It was the site of Córdoba's Roman circus (for horse races and other spectacles) and later of bullfights and Inquisition burnings. Nowadays it's ringed by balconied apartments and is home to an assortment of popular, though culinary run-of-the-mill, cafes and restaurants. The Mercado de la Corredera is a busy morning food market selling all kinds of fresh produce.

Palacio de Viana:

A stunning Renaissance palace set around 12 beautiful patios, the Viana Palace is a particular delight to visit in spring. Occupied by the aristocratic Marqueses de Viana until 1980, the large building is packed with art and antiques. The whole-house charge covers a one-hour guided tour of the rooms and access to the patios and garden. It's an 800m walk northeast from Plaza de las Tendillas.

The Roman Bridge:

The Roman Bridge which, according to the Arab geographer Al-drisi 'surpasses all other bridges in beauty and solidity', reflects little of its Roman roots, owing to frequent reconstruction over many decades. In the centre of the eastern side's stone handrails there is a little shrine to St Raphael, at whose feet the devout burn candles. It is, of course, unlikely that much of the original structure stands. The present structure is a medieval reconstruction, though the 19th-century cobbled paving does give a Roman feel. There is an irregular pattern to the 16 arches in size and abutment protections. You can walk over the Roman Bridge in either direction. The Roman Bridge is close to the great Mosque and leads to Torre de Calahorra at south end.