

a week in Andalucia



Oceanus: shopping mall reproduction mosaic.



Plaster decoration in the Iglesia San Juan de Dios.

Day 1: Derby - Antequera

From Malaga airport our coach lifted us over the southern Andalusian hills washed with spring green, then onto the lush plain where the Romans, knowing more than a thing or two, established a fortress in the already old city of "Antikaria". A stork circled the blue sky above the crisp new apartments freshly built on the edge of the city. Shrieking swifts, swallows and house martins sped about the old town, whilst in a gated courtyard, a thick cypress tree held a full complement of invisible but loudly chattering sparrows.

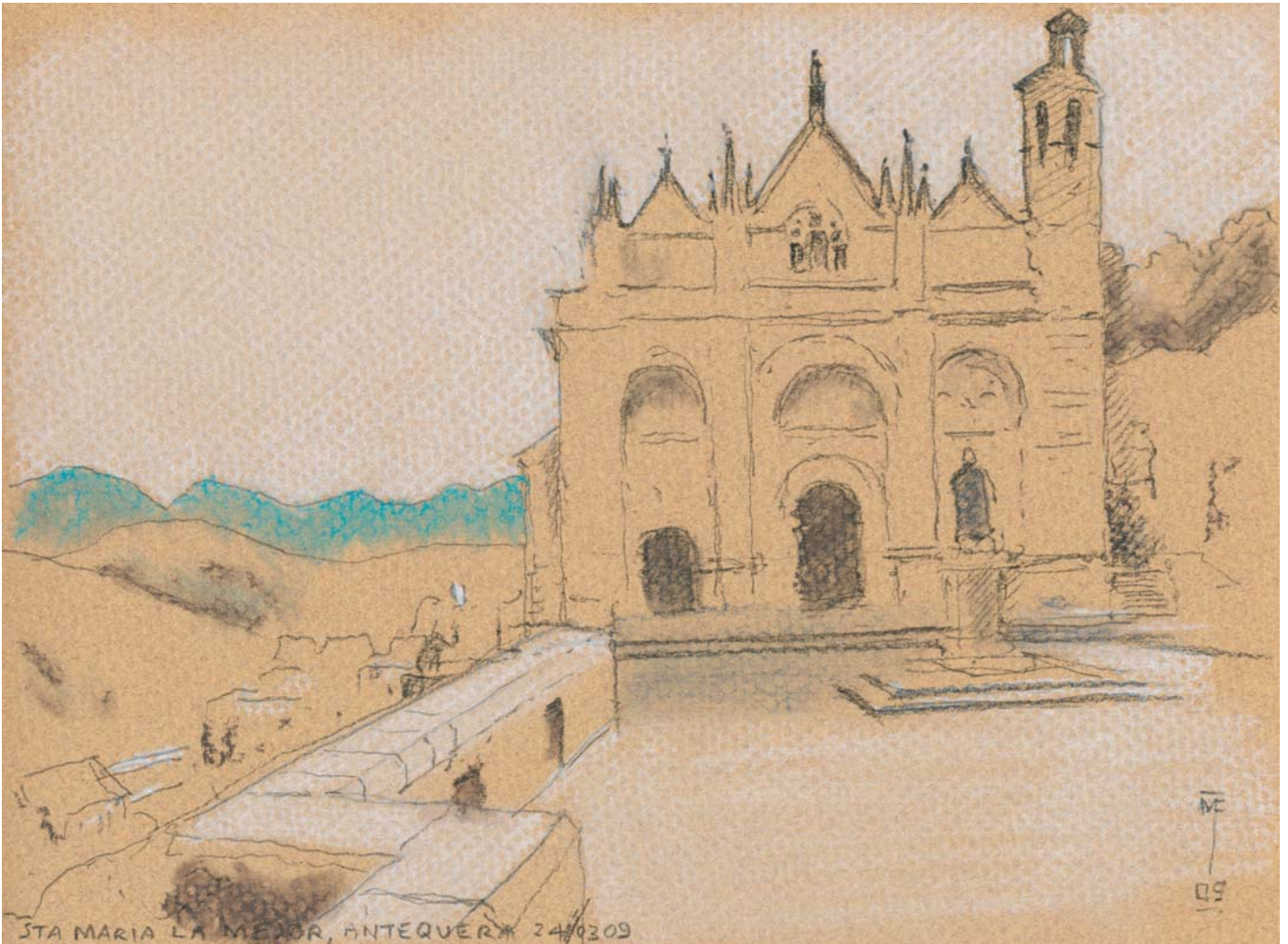
Over dinner we chatted to Chris and Margaret, who had previously spent just one day in Andalusia whilst on a cruise, and were so taken with the area so that they had promised themselves a longer visit. We assured them that the delights of Granada and Cordoba would not disappoint.

Day 2: Antequera

If you don't expect rain, take an umbrella. If you do, please yourself. We hadn't heeded that quirky and very English advice - our brollies were safely back at base. In Derby. Rain prompted a shopping mall sightseeing tour which took on a Roman flavour. That was the theme adopted by the recently built Veronica centre, with reproduction mosaics including head of the bearded Oceanus.

The old city is stuffed with churches, and we had an impromptu tour round one: Iglesia San Juan de Dios. We had ventured into a colonnaded courtyard and settled on a bench to sketch when Pepe, who evidently worked there insisted he showed us round the church. He unlocked a small door and we entered a barrel ceilinged ante room. High on the side walls were individual oil paintings of the 12 apostles, on one end wall was a deposition from the cross with smaller panels of Jesus and Mary, on the opposite end wall a depiction of Saint John himself. Most impressive was the florid and exuberant gesso plaster work fashioned into masses of foliage, animal heads, a Green Man and four naked ladies, a motif unique of its kind in the area. Impressed, we expected to leave when Pepe opened a further door. This led to the main church itself, and the plaster work which had so impressed us was but a foretaste of the mass of detail festooned around the walls and the central cupola. This church, we learned, had no choir but musically it was rich, being the venue for period music concerts.

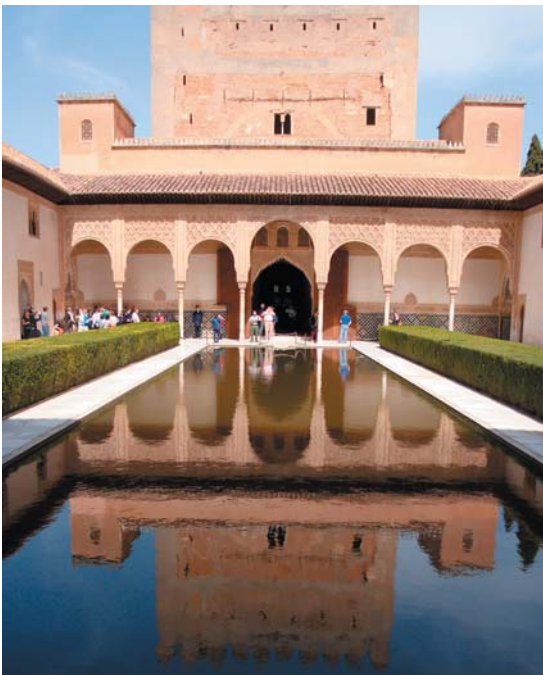
We stumbled into a bar and ordered coffee. We were just in time as just after we had ordered, the place was jammed with a crowd of English people. In no time we realised that they were all members of "our" group, and had just finished a half day tour of the city. Later we more or less independently wandered in an uphill direction to view the city from the vantage point of Arco De Los Gigantes and the Alcazar, where clinging to the hillside is the ochre red sandstone church of



Sta Maria La Mejor, Antequera.

Santa Maria La Mejor, and recently excavated Roman Thermae (baths).

It was now siesta time, but not for the building sites judging by the number of ready mix concrete trucks we saw in the town, but it was for the cafes, so a late DIY lunch was obtained from the local Mercadona supermarket.

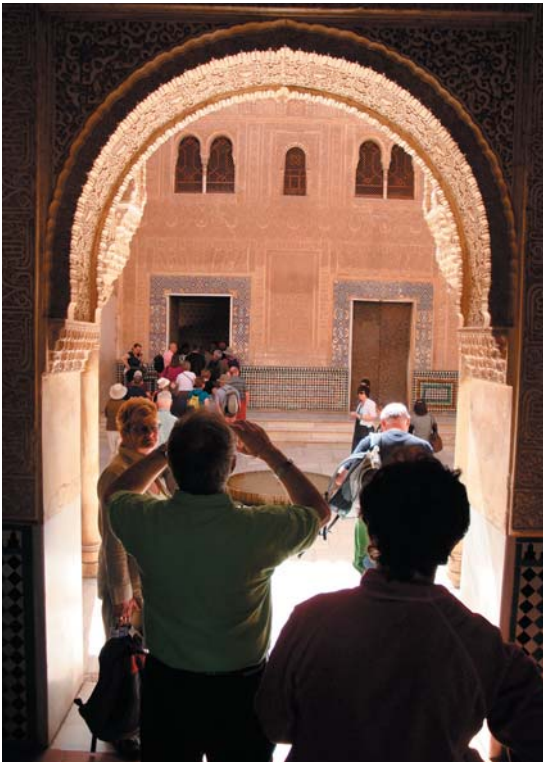


Alhambra Reflection.

Day 3: Granada

The Alhambra is Spain's top tourist attraction, with Barcelona's Sagrada Familia coming a close second. So we didn't anticipate such a tranquil and leisured visit that we had experienced in times past. We were not wrong. We were led between skyscraper cypress trees into the Generalife gardens, along with an endless procession of other visitors. Thence through ancient sculptured yew gateways to a cloistered view of the main palace on a nearby hillside whilst alongside elliptical streams arched into a ruler straight water channel. Taste, smell and colour were essential elements of the Arab garden, so too was water. Glowering pansies contrasted with the dense green trees, oranges burst from their trees and all were overlaid with the sound of trickling meltwater, abundant from the snow laden Sierra Nevada mountains.

So many visitors come to taste this special place that the magic has gone, trampled by the feet of 7,000 visitors a day.



Visitors in the Alhambra Palace.



Alhambra: fortified towers

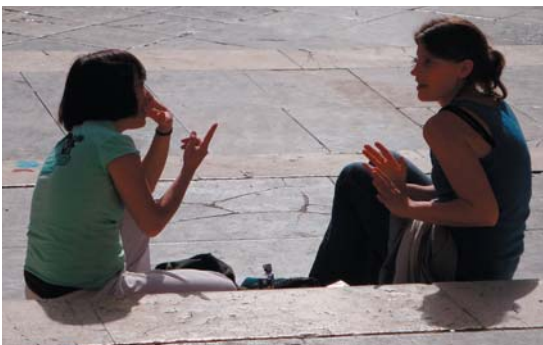
William, one of our party, remembered it from a visit he made 50 years ago. He was one of very few with no camera, everyone else straining to peer at angled digital screens, arms outstretched in a kind of ritualistic worship. We filed more or less obediently round our designated route as I recalled my own days spent in the Generalife doing unhurried sketches and chatting to curious strangers and custodians. We headed swiftly on to the main palace - and more queues.



The Gran Taberna Tapas Bar, Granada.

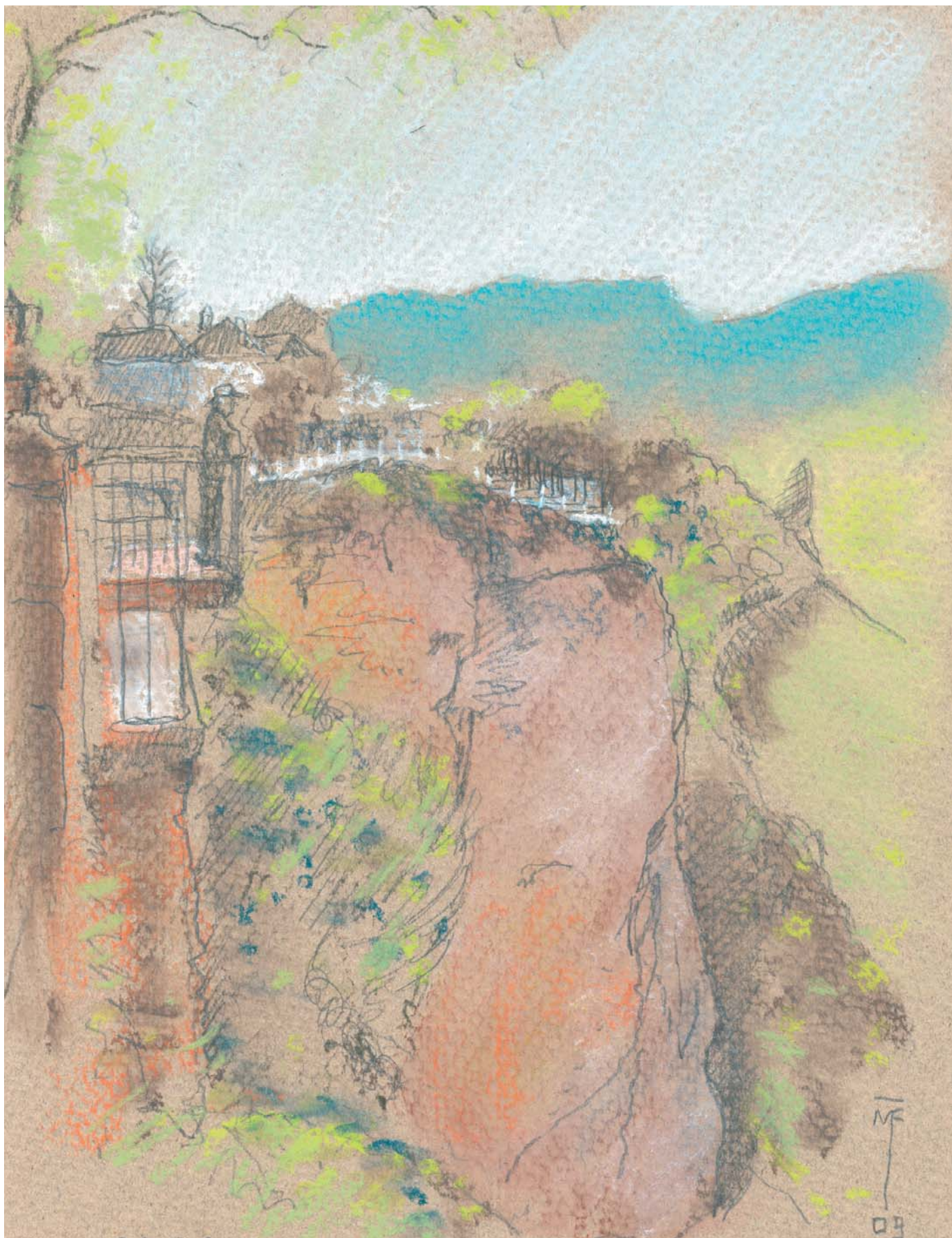
The court of the lions was lionless. Their stately presence was substituted with a simple canopy covering the centre space. Though of Moorish lineage they represent the 12 apostles. Their absence was, we were assured temporary as they were removed for “restoration”. Though latterly they had been off limits, time was when they could be stroked as they gently spewed forth their streams of water. Still to be seen were the impossibly ornate decorative carvings dripping from every part of the side chamber ceilings. Brilliant glimpses of the town pierced window openings, bearing testament to the Alhambra’s strategic fortified position.

For most of our party this was their first visit to the Alhambra, and for some the fulfillment of a long held ambition. Most bemoaned the lack of opportunity to linger and absorb the atmosphere. For us it was a return visit we were pleased to have made but given the popularity of the place, a visit we are unlikely to repeat.



Students on the steps near the cathedral.

Old as a city, Granada is young in population. Students from the leading university comprise a large sector, giving the streets a vibrant and lively edge. We ducked into an old tapas bar, the mellow yellow walls soothing us from the grind of the traffic outside whilst others, seemingly with all day to spare for lunch, melded into impromptu debating groups. Hemmed into back streets stands the impossibly massive cathedral, alongside which cheerful workmen trundled barrow loads of wet concrete to fill a yawning chasm in a side alley. And as if not to be outdone by the Alhambra, the city sports fountains in any available space, providing tempting lingering spots in the climbing afternoon temperature.



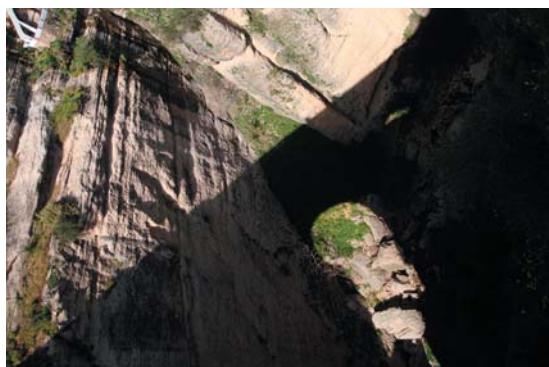
Former Moorish stronghold: Ronda.

Day 4: Ronda

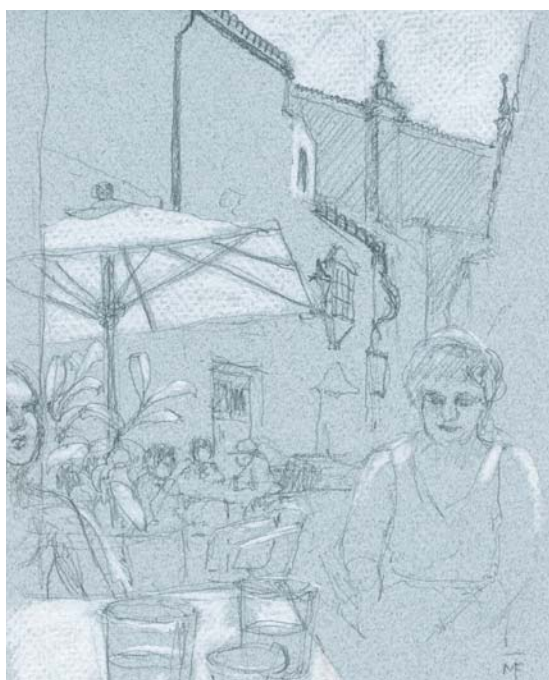
Good though guided excursions are, they make one feel like a tourist rather than a traveller. So today we opted for a train trip instead of being bussed to Malaga. After an early breakfast we taxied to the station in good time for the 08.41.



Sta Maria La Mejor, Ronda.



Shadow of the bridge, Ronda.



Lunchtime, Ronda.



Pueblo Blanco Casa.

Plaza Del Socorro.

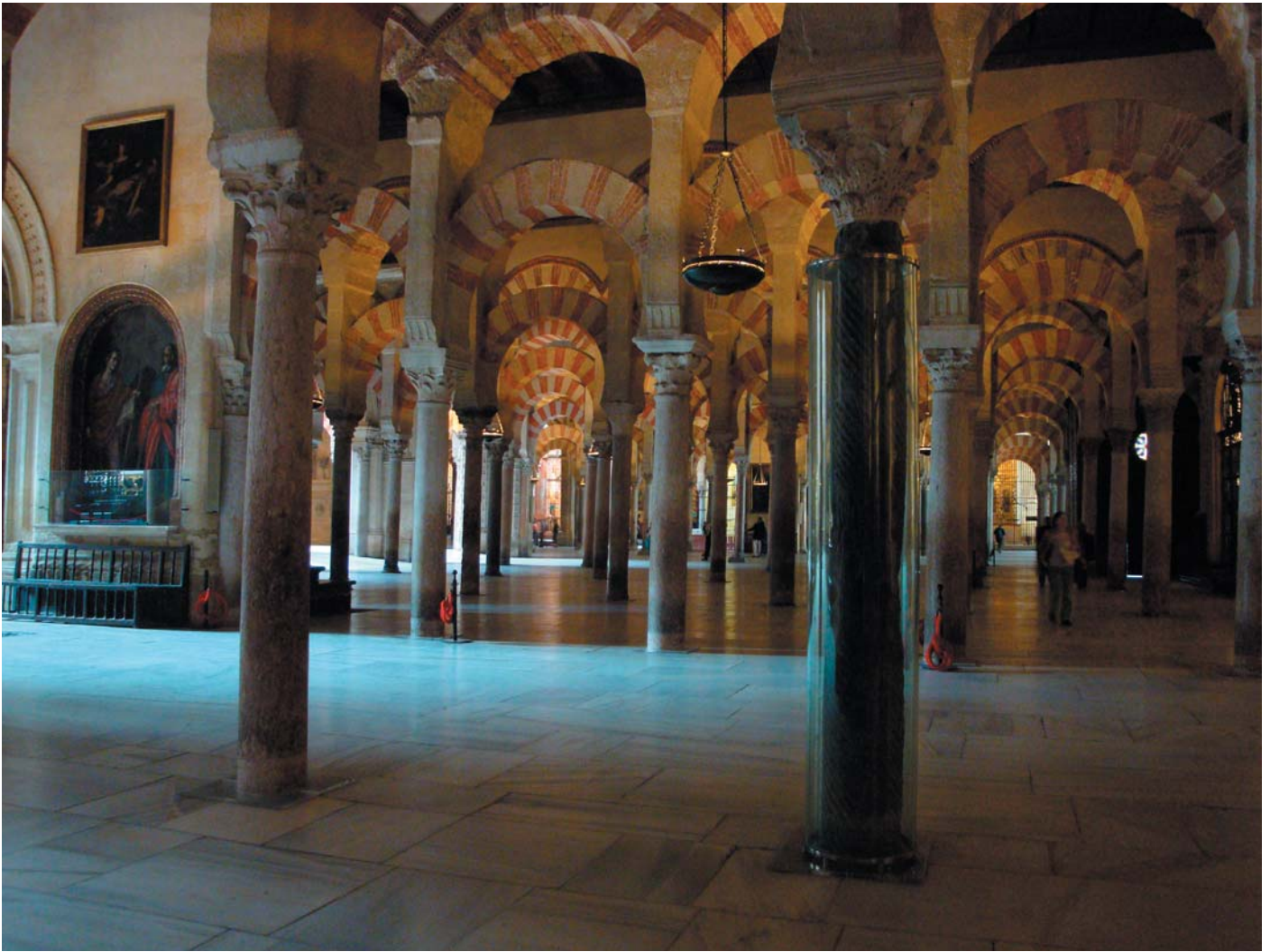
The ageing RENFE diesel unit snarled and rattled as it made the climb beyond Almargen-Canete la Real. We had left the arable farmland and olive groves of the plain and now dappled goats could be glimpsed in the tree shadows. Losing altitude we coasted into Ronda station, where a tall diesel with curiously low-rise TALGO coaches departed for Malaga. A glance at the station map suggested that the famous Ronda bridge was within easy walking distance. Tower cranes laced the sky by one of the narrow streets, and an attempt to see inside a church was thwarted when the two ladies just inside the door said it was being closed - doubtless it had only been open for Mass. However, the view from the railings at the far end of Alameda De Taja did not disappoint. We were virtually airborne, gazing down onto circling alpine swifts, tiny villas and farms, and chalkline roads wiggling over verdant green.

As a Moorish stronghold Ronda was in a virtually impregnable location. Other evidence of the Moors remains in the form of minarets since re-purposed as Christian belltowers. One such minaret is now the tower of Santa Maria La Major, against which nestles the only other remains of the 13th century mosque in the form of a lantern shaped prayer niche. Smaller and sweeter is the tower of San Sebastian, sole remains of the Nazrin mosque and standing just a few paces from the traffic on Calle Armenian. Not to be missed was of course the bridge itself: the "new" early 19th century bridge standing Samson like between the vertical pillars of rock which form the 100m deep Tajo gorge. We gazed down onto wheeling choughs and cliffs eroded into curious characterful pillars, more than one almost resembling the head of a lion. A late leisurely lunch under wide umbrellas in a narrow street and an exploration of the dazzling whitewashed Pueblos Blanco streets, and it was time to re-cross the bridge and make for our return train. At the station two sports cyclists squeezed into embarrassing to see bulging lycra joined the gathering group of passengers.

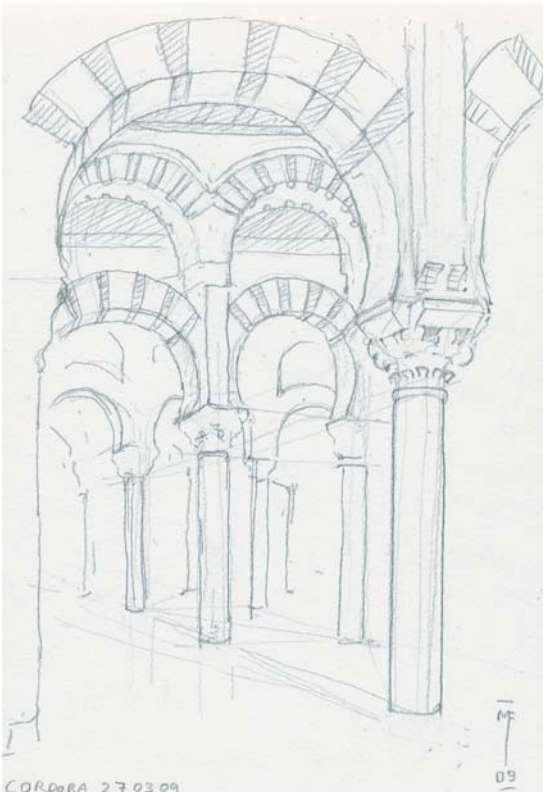
The trembling lengthening shadow of the train raced alongside us as the distant crust of mountains turned misty blue.

We spent the last of our energy toiling on foot up Avenida Estacion into old Antequera.





Interior of the Mosque, Cordoba.



Double arches support the timber roof.

Day 5: Cordoba

Today we were guided. Our motor coach swept us along motorway, from where we saw another under construction with an incomplete bridge craning forth on slender pillars over a deep valley. We were deposited first at a cafe stop near Montilla, famed for its particular type of wine. Then into the city, where, as elsewhere, we saw preparations for Semana Santa, (Easter), when processions are viewed from specially installed temporary staging. It is for the Spanish a celebratory time of the year, popular for weddings and shop windows are evidence of this. And along a wide Avenida strode a jet haired girl carrying two sparkling white frothy dresses over her shoulders.

Our group was met by the corner of the mosque in the old city by Luis, or "Well, Well, Well" as he is locally known, this being his famous opener to every speech he makes to his "English Friends": speeches delivered in stentorian tones for the whole city to hear.

Luis led us into the Jewish Quarter, authentic to the original 14th century street plan but with the only building from that period being the synagogue, built by a Moorish architect around 1315. There is little or no Jewish population in Cordoba today but the synagogue is still used occasionally. It is a small simple cube of a space, but with significant remnants of



Jamon serrano (cured ham) in the bar.



City oasis: in the Moorish courtyard.



Cordoba street tells of former community.

carved Hebrew inscription on the inside walls. From there we threaded our way along labyrinthine streets, including Callejon de las Flores (Flower Street), bedecked with pots which as yet bore no blooms but promises of glories to come.

The mosque of Cordoba was in its time second only in importance to the great mosque of Constantinople, predating those of Mecca and Medina by centuries. It owes its survival to its partial destruction, having, by a quirk of history, had a Christian Cathedral literally planted inside it. Predating the 785AD mosque was a Visigoth Christian church - part of the mosaic floor is now visible, its sunken location testifying to the succession of faiths building literally on top of their predecessors.

The mosque grew as the population increased from the 8th century on, and by the 12th century it had more than doubled in size, with a total of 19 complete aisles of double arched columns, the arches formed of alternating red brick and limestone segments supported on dark marble pillars. No picture can give an adequate impression of the deep sense of space in this interior, nor the sense of surprise, and shock, when stumbling into the ornate cathedral, inserted more or less in the centre of the space and built in stages over a 250 year period beginning in 1523.

Another reminder of Moorish times is Casa Andaluci: Calle De Los Judios 12: a 12th century house like many in the city with courtyard, orange and lemon trees, potted plants, brick arched colonnade and of course running water. Such interior open spaces, large and small, can be glimpsed from the street through closed iron gates, but this one is open to the public, and just as it did for its former residents, provided a tranquil respite from city life. Whilst not original, the interior has been carefully recreated in the Moorish style, and is supplemented with a display of early paper making equipment, demonstrating the process of grinding rags down to their fibres and pressing them into sheets.

Tapas bars abound in the old city. We selected one at random for a quick beer. Afterwards two Spanish car drivers asked me directions to the mosque - I wonder if they actually found it. We returned to our meeting place by the Rio Guadalquivir, over which spans the many arched Puente Romano, stripped of its dignity and its aged patina with recent sandblasting.

Day 6: Seville

We encountered heavy rain as we progressed along the motorway, and wondered what kind of brief visit we would therefore have to this city known for its hot climate and hot flamenco. We were fortunate. Fountains and large puddles were the only water we encountered in the streets, no more coming from the sky.

Seville is undoubtedly Spain's foremost Dressing Up City,



The Spanish Pavillion.

and that is against fierce competition from the rest of the country. Someone once coined the phrase “the vain in Spain stay mainly in Seville”. Setting for Carmen and at least 3 other operas, known worldwide for the famous dance, which sadly we would have no time to see, Seville dresses up in other ways. There can be no better place to see overblown and exuberant architecture, and no better example than the Spanish pavilion built for the 1929 Expo. Construction took 14 years, and the result is a huge flamboyant crescent shaped towered structure, into which the local architect incorporated numerous references to the history of Spain in features and tiled decoration.

There are lesser pavillions, at least lesser in size but no less ambitious in design: Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, California, Peru, Argentina - all posing in a true Seville manner, proudly proclaiming that in their own special way, they are the best.

Many streets are avenues of orange trees. They provide the shade which is much needed when the temperature climbs but their abundant fruit is inedible, nor suitable for making preserves. For that purpose trees are specially cultivated outside the city, and it took a Scotsman to invent what is

Cathedral from Reales Alcazares.





Cathedral tomb of Christopher Columbus.



In Juderia.



Sevillanos meeting, Saturday lunchtime.

known in Spain as “Mermalada”. We walked through a tree canopied square to the immense Gothic cathedral which stands foursquare like an oversized stone wedding cake, with a recycled minaret belltower. So hard did the 16th century cathedral stamp its foot on the site of the former mosque that it rose to three times the height, and maybe thirty times the amount of decoration. Even the dressing up is dressed up - the exterior is nothing compared to the obsessive amount of carving which bedecks every available surface inside. The organ has 7,500 pipes, contained in four lofts, and these have not escaped the attention of the wood carvers’ art. There is so much to take in that it is impossible to see decoration for decoration, with the skyscraper sized slab of silver, gold and gilt reredos seemingly designed to defy explanation.

And in the streets, innocent buildings, the lucky or unlucky ones depending on your view, have succumbed to the attention of the embellisher. It’s as if there are workmen who, dreaming wistfully of the flouncing skirts of their favourite flamenco dancer, patiently add a bit more curving scroll round windows here, doors there, and there, and there...

Even in their low-rise jeans the young Seville women stand and walk confidently, airily, each one knowing that in her way, she is the best of the best. It’s Saturday, and the streets and bars of the old city are a magnet for everyone, to meet, to show their presence and be proud to be seen. We sit in a tapas bar, plain in decor, but colourful in clientele. An extended Spanish family takes the next table: two generations - parents and grandparents. Theirs is the best family gathering, their conversation is witty, lively, and agreeable. Two tables away is the third generation: six children, unsupervised and impeccably behaved, enjoying the family gathering in just the same way: their conversation witty, lively and agreeable.

Our exit from the city is accompanied by excerpts from Carmen which Maureen our guide plays on the sound system of the bus. Carmen the young cigar maker: immortalised by Bizet, (who in fact never visited the city but used a friend’s source material for his opera), a legend of just one of 3,000 girls who worked the Cuban leaves into the smokers’ dream. The cigar factory is still there. We saw it, now a department of the university. From legendary tales we heard, the former occupants were also quite able to teach a thing or two!

Day 7: Antequera

Our second and last chance to see the old city. A bumble bee grazes the brilliant purple blossom of a Judas tree, and the air is bright but cold. The streets are Sunday quiet, and we hear a singing congregation as we pass by a church. Climbing to the Alcazaba the temperature decreases, not due to altitude but gathering clouds and strengthening wind.

Passing through Arco de los Gigantes (Arch of the Giants), we find the gateway into the Alcazaba is open, and the two ladies



After the rain sightseeing, Seville.



Antequera from El Arco de Los Gigantes.

at the ticket office tell us that entrance is free. The original builders would not have let anyone in so readily: Christian armies had to lay siege for 5 months to gain entry in 1410. This once key Moorish stronghold, built over a Roman fortress, has a bell tower added in 1582 and a clock mechanism installed some years later: still in place and largely intact.

Grey canopies of cloud streaked the Andalusian hills. The craggy limestone of the curiously head shaped 880 metre high “lovers leap” slowly became smothered: first the nose disappeared, then forehead and chin vanished into the descending cloud. The threat of rain encouraged us downhill. A church disgorged crowds from the second mass. We dodged past them and headed for a bar and the warmth of a cafe solo (very strong, very small and very sweet).

Day 8: Antequera - Derby

Rain laden skies - and a temperature of just 4 degrees. As always, winter returns just after spring clock altering. But the sun wins in Andalucia, and it does - by the time we are at the airport where beyond the runways, villages appear as little white dice sprinkled over the hills.

Having entertained us with history and culture throughout our travels, Maureen, our guide, regales us on the coach with anecdotes about the Spanish royal family. The best one was of King Juan Carlos II, who, out incognito on his motorbike, generously aided a fellow rider stranded and out of fuel. “You’re very kind - I wouldn’t do this for anyone else, not even the King” said the thankful biker. “By the way, who am I thanking?” Only then did the King reveal himself by removing his helmet.

And that is Spain: “Real” (Royal) Spain, evidence hidden at a glance but as we found, just there for the asking under the surface: from the baths at the Roman fortress, through the palaces of the Moors to the rich overblown splendour from the times of the Catholic Monarchs, when Spain was the centre of the largest empire in the world.

“A Week In Andalucia” tour organised by Page & Moy, with accommodation at the Hotel Antequera Golf, 23 - 30 March 2009

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