

TRIP TO SPAIN 2003

ROUTE TAKEN



Circular route: Madrid --> Granada --> Cordoba --> Seville --> Merida --> Trujillo --> Madrid

Day trips: Madrid \rightleftharpoons Toledo Madrid \rightleftharpoons Segovia Madrid \rightleftharpoons El Escorial

National Flag of Spain



The two pillars on either side of the coat-of-arms represent the ‘Pillars of Hercules’, which is the ancient Greek name given to the two promontories on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar.

1 THE TRIP BEGINS

The trip this year to Spain was supposed to have taken place last year, but I could not get any flights then. It was almost as bad this time. I tried Star Alliance airlines, such as Singapore Airlines and Thai Airways, but all flights were full. I tried British Airways and KLM with the same result. I could have gone via Moscow on Aeroflot, the Russian Airline, but thought that might be a bit dodgy. So I ended up with Swiss Airlines (the successor to Swissair) and flew to Madrid via Zurich. I joined the Swiss Airlines 'Club' which may be all right, as I think the airline has just joined the 'One World' group which includes American Airlines, Qantas, Cathay Pacific Airways and British Airways.

The trip lasted about 3 weeks and the places visited are shown on the map on the cover page. The trip started in Madrid with 2 nights at a hotel included in the travel package and one additional night. I then spent 12 days touring around the south and west of the country, ending up back in Madrid. The last 5 days were based in Madrid with a number of day trips to some important places close to the capital.

Travel around the country was by train and bus. Originally I considered a European hop-on-hop-off bus but this went only to a few places and was very expensive. The cost of travel in Spain is much cheaper than in other European countries and only cost me about HKD900 which is about 1/3 the price of the hop-on-hop-off bus. Even the (relatively) high-speed trains, which I did not use, are not too expensive. Purchasing the cheapest rail pass is also more expensive and would have been a waste of money as trains do not go to many places and most travelling ended up being on buses.



s Airlines MD-11



Typical train



Hostal room (Granada)

Accommodation was at hostals (which is the Spanish spelling for hostels) which are actually guesthouses rather than what we think of as hostels. They do not provide breakfasts, which is all right, as I could buy food from Supermarkets more cheaply than what breakfasts would cost. The cost for a night averaged about 15 EUROS. (Spain has switched from its own currency to the Euro, with 1 EURO = HKD 8.9).

The weather was generally good. For the first half of the trip, it was very hot and dry. On flying across the country towards Madrid, I noticed how brown and parched the land

appeared. Temperatures were usually over 30°C. But then the rains came and it poured. I was not really expecting rain and got soaked a couple of times. But it was only wet for 2 to 3 days. After that it was fine and much cooler which was good. One early morning in Madrid, a large digital thermometer on a pavement read just 6°C, but it did not feel anywhere near that temperature. Most of the time I wore just a T-shirt and shorts. Apart from the days travelling to and from Spain, I only wore long trousers and a sweater on one day.



Brown land (wind turbines in background)

The flight from Hong Kong left at about 11 p.m. on Saturday, September 11th on an MD-11, the same type of aircraft that we had flown in on China Airlines to Amsterdam. It arrived at Zurich about 12 hours later at 6 o'clock in the morning. There was a wait of about 3 hours for the connecting flight to Madrid, which was on an Airbus 319, also Swiss Airlines. In



The Alps (with the Matterhorn in the distance)

contrast to the Hong Kong to Zurich flight, which was completely full, the flight to Madrid was less than half full. On the way, the 'plane passed the Alps, though it was difficult to make out the main peaks. On the return trip, Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn (in the distance) could be seen (I think). The flight to Madrid was less than 2 hours, arriving about noon. On arrival, I had terrible stomach pains and felt an attack of diarrhoea coming. I had to rush to a toilet immediately after entering the terminal.

Phew! The stink was terrible. After that I was fine and had no more trouble throughout the trip. And also, no asthma trouble at all. Spain may be a good climate for asthmatics. Through immigration quite quickly (as I think everyone else had gone though while I was in the toilet!). While waiting for my backpack, I could not help but notice how many people were smoking, in spite of all the 'No Smoking' signs. This was, unfortunately, to be typical of what I experienced all through the trip. The level of smoking is very, very high and people just throw away their cigarette butts anywhere. They also smoke in buildings and even people working in smoke while working. For example, many bank tellers, in addition to the customers, would be smoking. There are exceptions, of course. Smoking is not allowed in buses, and people stick to this. But on the long-distance bus journeys, many people have to get out for a smoke when buses make stops.

There is a Metro (subway) from the airport into town though it was a long walk to the airport station. Not expensive either; only 1.1 EURO to any station in Madrid. I had looked up the address of the hotel on the Internet and found its location so knew exactly which Metro station to exit. It took only about 30 minutes on the train and then just a few more minutes to reach the hotel.

2 MADRID

After checking into the hotel in Madrid and having a rest, I didn't do much for the rest of the day. I walked the short distance down to the Puerto del Sol, the heart of Madrid and then to the Plaza Mayor (Main Square) to the tourist office which was closed (as it was a Sunday).

Quite hot, but dry. One of the first things I noticed were unusual street buskers. Instead of playing music, they were painted silver or other colours and stood absolutely still like statues. When someone donated a coin, they would move slightly in a mechanical manner.

Had a good sleep. Had to turn off the air conditioner as it was not too hot during the night. Breakfast was included. This consisted of a croissant, bread roll, biscuits, jam, orange juice and, instead of coffee or tea, milk. I then walked to a nearby travel agent which I had previously found on the Internet. I was hoping to plan my travel around Spain. But it was not only closed, it was closed down for renovation. I then located, with difficulty, other travel agents, but, as mentioned earlier, they were of no help. Walked down to the Renfe (Spanish railway) ticket office, and after taking a numbered ticket and waiting my turn, bought a ticket to Granada, but nothing else! Then walked around looking for a hostel for the third night in Madrid (the first two nights being at the hotel). Eventually found one not too far from one of the main railway stations at Atocha. The lady there was very nice – the first nice person I had met up to that time! Then down to the railway station, to check the layout and where to get the Granada train. Having done that, I found a supermarket, to buy some food. But, in the evening, had a buffet dinner at a bar-restaurant. Then returned to the hotel after a dead loss of a day without much sightseeing.

Day 3 was better. After breakfast, checked out and set off for the hostel. Rather cool at this time of the day. Got there about 10 a.m., left the backpack and headed off to look at the city. The major place I visited was the Royal Palace. (The King and Queen do not actually live there, but in a smaller place on the outskirts of the city.) Spent about two hours looking through the palace, its formal rooms, apartments, palace pharmacy and armoury. One room of significance was where, in 1986, Spain signed the treaty for its entry to the European Community. Actually walked around the main part of the place twice to get a better idea of it. From the palace, to the adjacent Cathedral. A rather modern



Royal Palace Madrid



Typical ceiling in the Royal Palace

building which is regarded by some as an eyesore. Perhaps that is why it is free to enter! Anyway, I thought it is all right. Sat and listened to the music by the organist who was practising at the time. From there, along to an area of Madrid where there was supposed to be many street markets but turned out to be only a few. Back to Atocha railway station to check out the timetables for nearby places to visit upon returning to Madrid.

Up early the next morning. After my quick breakfast of food

from the supermarket (bread, fruit, yoghurt which became the ‘standard’ breakfast throughout the trip), off to the station to catch the 8.25 a.m. train to Granada. At the station, I spoke to a couple from North Carolina who has seen the ‘NC’ on the cap I was wearing, which Gavin had given me. Quite an enjoyable but slow journey, eventually arriving in Granada at 2.15 p.m. As there was no information at all in the station, I was trying to work out what to do when a German lady helped with accommodation. She went with me to the centre of town to the same hostel where she was staying. The hostel was full so I stayed in another, poorer, hostel nearby for the first night and in that hostel for the next two nights. From there, walked to the nearby cathedral. Bought a ‘Granada pass’ which included entrance to a number of sites plus 10 bus trips. This didn’t actually save much money but was very convenient. For example, it enabled me to book a time to see the Al Alambra instead of joining the queue and risking the chance that all the tickets for the day would be sold out (which happened the day I visited it). By this time, the day was over so just had a meal in a Pizza Hut. Spoke briefly to a chap there who was wearing a black Rugby jersey with a NZ flag on it. He turned out to be a fan of Jonah Lomu.



Al Alambra in Granada

However, he played soccer and not Rugby!

To understand Granada, and all of Spain, It is necessary to have a brief history lesson. The history can be divided into four main periods:

1. Roman period (~ 200 BC – 400 AD). The earlier peoples, known as Iberians were eventually subdued by the Romans, though this took about 200 years, as the Iberians were largely independent communities rather than one country and so they Romans had to fight each community in turn. They Romans occupied most of Spain and there is a lot of evidence of their time there.

2. Visgoths (~ 400 – 700 AD). These were from the area we now know as Germany and replaced the Romans when the empire was collapsing. They established a form of Christianity in Spain. During this period, Spain became a Catholic country. Very little evidence remains of this period today.

3. Muslim/Moorish rule (711 – 1492). Due to succession problems among the Visgoths, help was sought from peoples of North Africa who had recently been converted to the new religion of Islam. They eventually conquered most of Spain, apart from the North. Bit by bit they were expelled by the kings from the North. Their final defeat was at Granada in 1492.

4. Modern period (for want of a better name). A succession of kings and queens. Among the most important were Isabel and Fernando (whose daughter, Catherine of Aragon, was Henry VIII’s first wife) and Felipe (Philip) II, who, at one time, was supposed to Marry Elizabeth I.

3 ANDALUSIA

Andalusia is the large southern part of Spain, which was a Muslim stronghold during their 700 years or so in Spain. The name itself comes from a Moorish word. The three main cities are Granada, Cordoba (pronounced Cordova) and Seville, the last being the capital. Granada was built and developed by the Moors, in contrast to other places that were conquered from the Visigoths. And it was the last place to be re-conquered by the Spanish Christians; this was in 1492, the same year that Columbus discovered the Americas. As other Muslim parts of Spain were being re-conquered, large number of Muslims and Jews, who often co-operated with the Muslims, come to Granada. Because of this influx, the city developed into a major economic and cultural centre.



Luxury hotel inside the Alhambra



Garden in the Alhambra

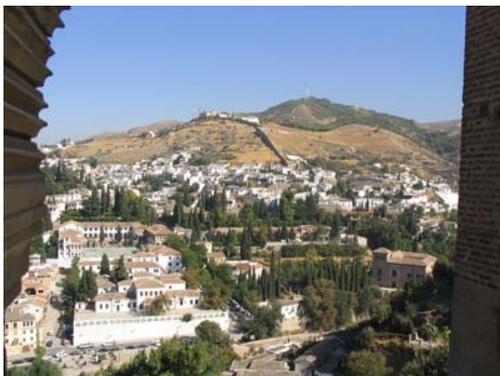
The main attraction in Granada is the **Alhambra**, which initially was a Muslim fortress built about 700 AD on one of the two hills of Granada. It later developed into a lavish palace together with a nearby summer retreat called the 'Generalife' (but with a pronunciation quite different from how it might be pronounced in English). Arrived there at about 10.30 am and there many people lined up for tickets only to be disappointed when it was announced that all tickets for the morning had been sold.

(Remember that this did not

affect me, as I had bought a Granada card with an entrance time stamped on it.) Spent about 4 hours looking around. Part of it consists of the original Muslim fortress and the later palace. Some buildings that replaced some of the original parts. The most interesting were the Muslim parts. I liked the arches on pillars in the palace and the many fountains, which were an important feature of Islamic architecture.



Fortress inside the Alhambra



View of old city below the Alhambra

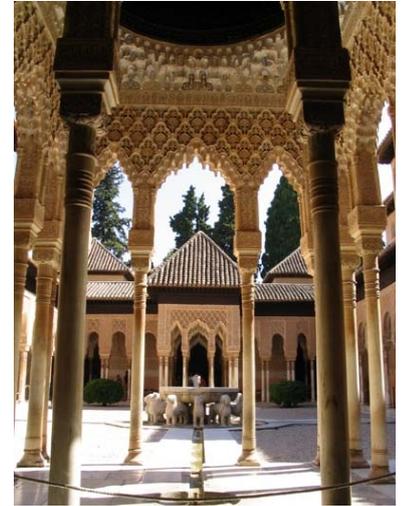
After leaving the Alhambra, took a minibus down the hill. (Only did this as the Granada card included 10 free bus rides.) Then took another bus to the inter-city bus station on the outskirts of the town to buy a ticket to Cordoba. Returned to town and visited the Royal Chapel and the adjacent Cathedral. The next morning, I needed to cash some Euro travellers' cheques and changes large-denomination Euro notes purchased in HK into smaller notes as many shops, hostals, etc, in Spain will not accept

them. In fact, because the 500 EURO note is so unpopular and it is difficult to come across there, it has been called the ‘Bin Laden’ note! Took a bus to visit a 16th Century monastery. Not so interesting and only went there as it was included on the card. Then back to the centre of town to look at another more-interesting monastery. This one had a quadrangle full on orange trees, which seems to be a feature of many cathedrals and monasteries in the country. As there was still time left in the day, decided to visit a dinosaur exhibition at the Science Museum (also on the card). However, on arriving, it was closed! In the evening, walked around the streets of the town. In Spain, because of the siesta time at midday when many shops are closed and places often seem deserted, many people come out in the evenings. This seems to be an important social time with shops open until late. Had a look at the Alhambra, which is floodlit at night. On the way back to the hostel, came across an open-air orchestral (mainly brass) concert in a small



Generalife summer retreat adjacent to the Alhambra

square outside the Cathedral and near the hostel. Sat down, after checking that dogs had not left anything there! and listened until the concert finished, which, appropriately enough was with the song ‘Granada’ I found Granada to be a very interesting and enjoyable place with people more friendly, in stark contrast to what I experienced in Madrid!



Arches and pillars in the Alhambra palace

Up early the next morning for the bus journey to Cordoba. Cool and dark in the morning but pleasant. Took the local bus to the bus station and left for Cordoba at 10 a.m. Took about 2.5 hours. The countryside is very uniform not very interesting – dry, rolling hills and olive trees and just a few villages or small towns. (Unlike England, where there is something of interest every few miles.) At Cordoba, the rail and bus

stations are next to each other so compared the bus and train times and prices to Seville. The train was cheaper but with less convenient times so bought a bus ticket. Walked down to the old part of Cordoba looking for a hostel along the way. Eventually took the first one I found. *Very* hot at this time of the day. After checking in, walked around looking for an information office, which in spite of signs, could not find one. Turned out that there was one that, because of the siesta time, did not open until 4.30 p.m.! The old city is dominated by the ‘Mesquita’ (which means mosque) a marvel of Muslim architecture and the largest (?) in the world in terms of floor area. It is noted for its large number of Muslim arches and pillars, there being about 1800 of them in the building (I think). When Cordoba was re-conquered by Christian Spain, the middle of the mosque was replaced by a Christian cathedral. There was also a large Jewish community in the city, which again contributed to the life and culture of the country.



With Albert Einstein outside the Science Museum. Granada

NB: This file is incomplete! From Granada, I visited other places and returned to Madrid.