



# Granada Province

POP 918,000

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## Why Go?

The last citadel of the Moors in Europe is a tempestuous place where Andalucía's complex history is laid out in ornate detail. The starting point for 99% of visitors is the Alhambra, the Nasrid emirs' enduring gift to architecture, a building whose eerie beauty is better seen than described. Below it nestles a city where brilliance and shabbiness sit side by side in bohemian bars, shadowy *teterías* (teahouses), winding lanes studded with stately *cármenes* (large houses with walled gardens), and backstreets splattered with street art.

The province's alternative muse hides in the snow-capped mountains that rise behind the Alhambra. The Sierra Nevada guard the highest peaks in mainland Spain and the country's largest ski resort. The southern side of the range shelters Las Alpujarras, which are characterised by their massive canyons where white villages replete with traditional flat-roofed Berber houses practice old-fashioned craft-making.

For more curiosities, head north to the troglodyte city of Guadix, where cave-living never went out of fashion.

## When to Go

**Mar–Apr** The solemn build-up to Easter and the subsequent ferias and celebrations are always a good time to visit Andalucía's towns and cities. The downside – elevated accommodation prices.

**May–Jun** Balmy spring weather, flowers in bloom and festivals a-plenty, if you don't mind the crowds. This is also the ideal season for hiking in the Alpujarras.

**Nov–Feb** The South Coast has the mildest winters in Europe. Accommodation prices fall and there's skiing in the Sierra Nevada.

## GRANADA

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Read up on your Nasrid history, slip a copy of Federico García Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* into your bag, and acquire a working knowledge of Andalucía's splendid Moorish architectural heritage – Granada is calling and its allure is hard to ignore.

Internationally revered for its lavish Alhambra palace, and enshrined in medieval history as the last stronghold of the Moors in Western Europe, Granada is the darker more complicated cousin of sunny, exuberant Seville. Humming with a feisty cosmopolitanism and awash with riddles, question marks, contradictions and myths, this is a place to put down your guidebook and let your intuition lead the way – through the narrow ascending streets of the Albayzín and the tumbling white-walled house gardens of the Realejo quarter. Elegant yet edgy, grandiose but gritty, monumental but marked by pockets of stirring graffiti, 21st century Granada is anything but straightforward. Instead, this sometimes stunning, sometimes ugly city set spectacularly in the crook of the Sierra Nevada is an enigmatic place where – if the mood is right – you sense you might find something that you've long been looking for. A free tapa, perhaps? An inspirational piece of street art? A flamenco performance that finally unmasks the intangible spirit of *duende*?

Endowed with relics from various epochs of history, there's lots to do and plenty to admire in Granada; the mausoleum of the Catholic monarchs, old-school bars selling generous tapas, bohemian *teterías* where Arabic youths smoke *cachimbas* (hookah pipes), and an exciting nightlife that bristles with the creative aura of counterculture. Make no mistake, you'll fall in love here, but you'll spend days and weeks trying to work out why. Best idea – don't bother. Instead, immerse yourself in the splendour, and leave the poetic stanzas to the aesthetes.

## History

As lively as Granada is today, it's hardly what it was five centuries ago. The city came into its own late in Spain's Islamic era. As Córdoba and Seville fell to the Catholics in the mid 13th century, a minor potentate called Mohammed ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr established an independent state based in Granada. The town was soon flooded with Muslim refu-

gees, and the Nasrid emirate became the last bastion of Al-Andalus.

The Alhambra was developed as royal court, palace, fortress and miniature city, and the Nasrids ruled from this increasingly lavish complex for 250 years. During this time, Granada became one of the richest cities in Europe, with a population of more than 350,000. Under emirs Yusuf I (r 1333–54) and Mohammed V (r 1354–59 and 1362–91), traders did booming business, and artisans perfected such crafts as wood inlay.

As usual, though, decadent palace life bred a violent rivalry over succession. One faction supported the emir Abu al-Hasan and his Christian concubine, Zoraya, while the other backed Boabdil (Abu Abdullah), Abu al-Hasan's son by his wife Aixa – even though Boabdil was still just a child. In 1482 Boabdil started a civil war and, following Abu al-Hasan's death in 1485, won control of the city. With the emirate weakened by infighting, the Catholics pounced in 1491. Queen Isabel in particular had been smitten by Granada – so fittingly named for the jewel-like pomegranate, she thought, its buildings clustered like seeds along the hillsides – and she wanted it for herself. After an eight-month siege, Boabdil agreed to surrender the city in return for the Alpujarras valleys, 30,000 gold coins and political and religious freedom for his subjects. Boabdil hiked out of town – letting out the proverbial 'Moor's last sigh' as he looked over his shoulder in regret – and on 2 January 1492, Isabel and Fernando entered the city ceremonially in Muslim dress, to set up court in the Alhambra.

Their promises didn't last. They soon divided the populace, relegating the Jews to the Realejo and containing the Muslims in the Albayzín. Subsequent rulers called for full-scale expulsion, first in 1570 and again in 1610. It is said that there are families in Morocco who, still today, sentimentally keep the keys to their long-lost homes.

This brutal expulsion backfired, however, and Granada – once the Catholic Monarchs' prize jewel – became a backwater. In 1828 American writer Washington Irving visited the ruined palace and decided to move in. His *Tales of the Alhambra*, published in 1832, brought tourists from all over the world to marvel at the city's Islamic heritage; they helped give the city a little push into the modern age. Now Granada thrives on a culture that mixes Spanish, Moroccan, *gitano* (Roma) and student, plus tourist, life.