



# Seville & Andalucía's Hill Towns

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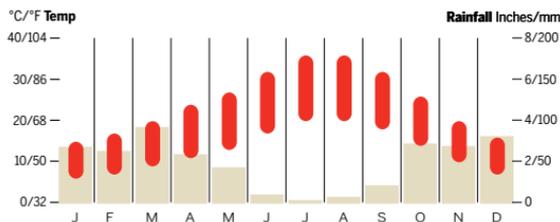
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## Why Go?

A parched region fertile with culture, a conquered land that went on to conquer, a fiercely traditional place that has accepted rapid modernisation: western Andalucía has multiple faces. Here, in the cradle of quintessential Spain, the questions are often as intriguing as the answers. Who first concocted flamenco? How did tapas become a national obsession? Could Cádiz be Europe's oldest settlement? Are those really Christopher Columbus' bones inside Seville cathedral? And where on earth did the audacious builders of Córdoba's Mezquita get their divine inspiration from? Putting together the missing pieces of the puzzle is what makes travel in the region the glorious adventure that it is. Seville is western Andalucía's Holy Grail, Córdoba deserves more than a day trip, while the white towns will lure you into quieter rural areas and perhaps inspire you to visit the region's only national park amid the bird-rich wetlands of Doñana.

## When to Go

### Seville



**Apr** Sombre Semana Santa processions are followed by the exuberance of the spring fairs.

**May** Relatively cool weather. Many towns and villages celebrate *romerías* (pilgrimages).

**Late Sep** The heat diminishes, the crowds go home – but it's still warm enough for the beach.

## SEVILLE

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Some cities have looks, other cities have personality. The *sevillanos* – lucky devils – get both, courtesy of their flamboyant, charismatic, ever-evolving Andalusian metropolis founded, according to myth, 3000 years ago by the Greek god Hercules. Drenched for most of the year in spirit-enriching sunlight, this is a city of feelings as much as sights, with different seasons prompting vastly contrasting moods: solemn for Semana Santa, flirtatious for the spring fiesta and soporific for the gasping heat of summer.

Like all great cities, Seville has historical layers. Roman ruins testify the settlement's earliest face, memories of the Moorish era flicker like medieval engravings in the Santa Cruz quarter, while the riverside Arenal reeks of lost colonial glory. Yet, one of the most remarkable things about modern Seville is its ability to adapt and etch fresh new brushstrokes onto an ancient canvas.

### History

Founded by the Romans, the city of Seville didn't really flower until the Moorish Almoravid period, which began in 1085. They were replaced by the Almohads in the 12th century; Caliph Yacub Yusuf made Seville capital of the Almohad realm and built a great mosque where Seville's cathedral now stands. But Almohad power dwindled after the disastrous defeat of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, and Castilla's Fernando III (El Santo; the Saint) went on to capture Seville in 1248.

Fernando brought 24,000 settlers to Seville and by the 14th century it was the most important Castilian city. Seville's biggest break was Columbus' discovery of the Americas in 1492. In 1503 the city was awarded an official monopoly on Spanish trade with the new-found continent. It rapidly became one of the biggest, richest and most cosmopolitan cities on earth.

But it was not to last. A plague in 1649 caused the death of half the city's population, and as the 17th century wore on, the Río Guadalquivir became more silted and less navigable. In 1717 the Casa de la Contratación (Contracting House; the government office controlling commerce with the Americas) was transferred to Cádiz.

The beginnings of industry in the mid-19th century saw the first bridge across the Guadalquivir, the Puente de Triana (or

Puente de Isabel II), built in 1852, and the old Almohad walls were knocked down in 1869 to let the city expand. In 1936 Seville fell very quickly to the Nationalists at the start of the Spanish Civil War, despite resistance in working-class areas (which brought savage reprisals).

Things have been looking up since the 1980s when Seville was named capital of the newly autonomous Andalucía (over the last quarter-century a number of provinces in Spain have been given a certain amount of autonomy from Madrid). Seville's economy was steadily improving with a mix of tourism, commerce, technology and industry in the early 2000s. Then, in 2008, the financial crisis hit the city with a sharp jolt, as it did in the rest of Andalucía. Although big metropolitan projects such as the Metropol Parasol continued, the economic situation hit rock bottom in 2012 with sky-high unemployment and serious recession. The last three years have been more optimistic with growth returning to the Spanish economy, although unemployment in Seville province still hovers stubbornly above 30%.

### Sights

### Catedral & Around

**Catedral & Giralda** CATHEDRAL  
(Map p584; [www.catedraldesevilla.es](http://www.catedraldesevilla.es); adult/child €9/free; ☀ 11am-3.30pm Mon, 11am-5pm Tue-Sat, 2.30-6pm Sun) Seville's immense cathedral, one of the largest Christian churches in the world, is awe-inspiring in its scale and sheer majesty. It stands on the site of the great 12th-century Almohad mosque, with the mosque's minaret (the Giralda) still towering beside it.

After Seville fell to the Christians in 1248, the mosque was used as a church until 1401. Then, in view of its decaying state, the church authorities decided to knock it down and start again. Legend has it that they wanted to construct a church so large future generations will think they were mad. When it was completed in 1502 after one hundred years of hard labour, the Catedral de Santa María de la Sede, as it is officially known, was (and remains) the largest church in the world by volume and pretty much defines the word 'Gothic'. It is also a veritable art gallery replete with notable works by Zurbarán, Murillo, Goya and others.