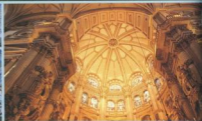




andalusia's heart & soul

Wander through the narrow alleys of the charming city of Granada, and uncover a romantic and fiercely passionate side of Southern Spain. Nellie Huang gets lost amidst its flamenco tablaos, tapas bars and bullfighting ring

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Approaching Granada for the first time, I saw slopes of olive plantations and ravishing white cottages looming ahead. It sparked the beginning of my passionate love affair with this enchanting city. Tucked away in the Andalusian region of Southern Spain, Granada is said to be the palpating heart of the country, keeping its rich and soulful Iberian culture alive. Capturing the essence of Spain, Granada is best known for its flamboyant performing arts and Mediterranean landscape fused with Arabic architecture.

Al-fresco cafés are scattered around the quaint **Plaza Nueva**, as I sat and enjoyed the typical Spanish breakfast of chocolate con churros [deep-fried dough sticks dipped into semi-solid hot chocolate]. Wandering through the labyrinth of enigmatic alleyways in the **Alcaicería**, I was momentarily transported to the exotic Islamic world that conquered Granada for over 800 years. Granada's contrasting backdrop of the **Sierra Nevada** distracted me from the swirling illusion as the white snow mountains enthralled with its sheer beauty. The bells of the **Grand Cathedral** chimed whimsically while I whisked my way through the cobblestone paths. As night fell, tapas bars lit up the city with a shining glimmer, dishing up appetising platters amongst the crowd. There's no wonder Granada is crowned "the Tapas Capital of Spain".

To uncover the country's bona fide personality, I went on a tipsy [pardon the sangria!] trail through some of the most stunning barrios [neighbourhoods] in town, to acquaint myself with its soul.



SOP: Sierra Nevada's panoramic landscape
BOTTOM FROM LEFT: The town of Sierra Nevada; The Grand Cathedral; Plaza Nueva, New Square



Feast

Tapas: Sharing Platters

In the hip tapas zone of **Pedro Antonio de Alarcón**, enjoy a glass of Tinto de verano [red wine with soda, topped with a Bocado de jamón [ham sandwich] amidst the lurid atmosphere. Drinks cost around EUR1.60 [SDG3.26], and tapas are free. Cured meat is the Spaniard's culinary pride, and jamón is their worshipped holy grail. In the form of a pig's leg hung on the walls of every restaurant or bar, jamón ibérico is the cream of the crop.

El Reventaero [Camino de Ronda 101] is a local favourite, popular for its generous portions and a wide selection - a full dish of *pulpo* [octopus] or *caracoles* [snails] is served along with a dish of flan.

With its slick and stylish design, **D'Cuadros** [Calle Pintor López Mezquita 14] wins the hearts of the city's fashion-forward *durbanites*. Its tapas menu is equally unique - from crispy *empanadas* [meat puff], to deep-fried camembert cheese. Made famous by its *Tortilla española* [Spanish omelette], **La Riviera** [Calle Cetti Meriweg 7] exudes an authentic medieval charm, welcoming guests with an ancient dungeon décor.

Seafood: Feasting Under the Sun

For a taste of the city's finest, **Plaza de Bib Rambla** is home to vivacious taverns and classic European *meson* [inn]. Most of them offer a *menu del día* [set of the day], consisting of a salad, a main dish, a dessert and a glass of wine or beer, for EUR10 to 18.

Sample **El Centro de Granada's** [Plaza Bib Rambla 9] house speciality, *Bandeja de pescado frito* [fried seafood platter] and wash it down with a chilled glass of *vino dulce de Jerez*, sweet Spanish dessert wine.

The legendary *paella* [yellow rice simmered with seafood] often plays the protagonist of a Spanish feast, especially at the **Restaurante La Niña** [Campo del Príncipe 14]. Its delectable *Paella de marisco* that serves up to three persons is reasonably priced at EUR30. This dining haven stands out from the rest with its lively facades, all decked out with handmade ceramics.

Chill

Chill: Unwind with a View

Gazing out into the distant snow-capped mountains, the **El Huerto de Juan Ranas** [Callejón de Atarazana 8, www.restaurantejuanranas.com/] perched on the city's hilltop,





is blissfully endowed with an alluring vista. Kick back with a glass of Cava or Rioja and savour its reputed *pastela* [puffed pastry filled with meat, almonds and onion caramel].

El Cambrío [Camino del Sacramento 62], situated in the gypsy quarter of Sacromonte, is a hilltop cave that transforms into an avant-garde club at midnight. While soaking in the panoramic view of the Alhambra, you can dance into the night on its rooftop terrace or unwind in its patio.

The nocturnal creatures have nothing to worry about, as the city's party central, **Calle Elvira**, comes to life at midnight. The Spaniards definitely know how to party, as the city doesn't sleep till 5am. Check out the city's biggest club, **Granada 10** [Carcel Raja 10] www.granada10.com with its grandiose interior.

Admire

Monument: Ancient Arabic Palace

Almost clinching a spot as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the **Alhambra Palace** is one of the most visited monuments in Spain. Perched precariously on the forested hilltop of Granada, the Alhambra exhibits intricate Islamic carvings in the setting of a lavish thirteenth-century royalty residence.

It takes an entire day to explore the sprawling palace. Don't miss out on the *Patio de los Leones*, a pavilion composed of arabesques and a fountain of animal statues. The royal garden, *Generalife*, retains an eclectic collection of fountains, cypress avenues and grottos. Avoid the tourists by exploring the Alhambra at night, when the fortress is lit up with a mystical glow. Entry fee is EUR12 and you can catch the mini Alhambra bus from Plaza Nueva. www.alhambra.org/

Architecture: Enthralling Medieval Moorish Walls

With narrow winding paths and white-washed houses inherited from the Medieval Moorish times, the **Albayzin** emanates an overwhelming bohemian spirit. Climb the slopes to its peak to catch a breathtaking peek of the Alhambra and the entire city at the viewing point, **Mirador de San Nicolás**. Street artists and performers gather here to strum on their Spanish guitars.

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: White-washed houses of the Albayzin; The landscape of the Albayzin; Alhambra Palace; A lush garden in Alhambra Palace; Patio de Los Leones in the Alhambra Palace

BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: Seafood Platter at Plaza Bib-Rambla; Deep-fried calamari in the sun; The reputed Paella de Marisco of Restaurante la Ninka; Pulpo a la feria





Shop

Shop: Sights and Sounds in Colourful Bazaars

The **Alcaicería** ([Calle Alcaicería 1](#), [www.alcaiceria.com](#)), in the heart of the city centre, boasts of a mélange of shops shimmering with Arabic ornaments and Andalusian art and craft. There is no better place to bag some souvenirs home.

For the finest local food products, scour through the wide range of wine, olive oil and cured ham at **Al Sur de Granada** ([Calle Elvira 150](#), [www.alsurdegranada.net](#)). Dedicated to the gastronomic heritage of the region, the grocery store has all you need to satiate the food-lover in you.

Watch out for the **weekend apice markets** surrounding the Grand Cathedral every Sunday, as the tangy aroma fills the streets.

Slumber

Stay: Experience the Andalusian Living

The **Alhambra Palace Hotel** ([Plaza Arquitecto García de Paredes 1](#), [www.h-alhambrapalace.es](#)) is the most prestigious hotel in the city, full of history and extravagance. The 4-star hotel displays a magnificent view of the city and medieval Arabic luxury only fit for royalty. Just five minutes away from the monumental palace,

it is a perfect stay for those with spare cash, with room rates starting from EUR130.

The charismatic Andalusian guesthouse, **el Numero 8** ([Calle de la Virgen del Carmen](#), [www.elnumero8.com](#)), is situated in the gorgeous Albaycín. Offering self-catering apartments for the independent traveller, it embodies strong local flavour with an artistic touch. Each apartment comes with a private kitchen, a living room, bedroom, and a shared rooftop terrace, for EUR40 a night.

Makuto Guesthouse ([Calle Tifa 18](#), [www.makutoguesthouse.com](#)) prides itself on a bohemian backpacker's setting and inexpensive lodging (EUR15 for a dorm bed). With hammocks and a Zen lounge area, expect to chill out and meet fellow travellers. Free wine tasting and cooking courses are organised here.

TOP RIGHT (LEFT): Shops in the Alcaicería; Mystical Arabic lights in the Alcaicería; Sonc Alpujars; A rural house in Alpujars; Lavish interior of the hotel Alhambra Palace
BOTTOM: Winter wonderland in Sierra Nevada





Flamenco Dance

Granada's gypsy quarter of Sacromonte is littered with rustic caves, and is renowned for its flamenco dance performances. The soulful dancer stomps compellingly, lost in the melancholic voice of the vocalist. **Cuevas Los Tarantos** (Sacromonte www.cuevaslostarantos.com) has a vibrant ambience, where audiences clap to the rhythms and shout "olé!" spontaneously. A two-hour show here costs around EUR15.



A show at the **Tablao Flamenco Albayzín** (Carretera de Murcia, www.flamencoalbayzin.com) includes a drink and a guided tour around the Albayzín. Situated next to the Mirador de San Cristóbal, don't miss out on a nocturnal panorama of the city.

Love to dance? Learn the invigorating art from flamenco veterans at **Escuela Montalbán** (www.escuela-montalban.com) for EUR100 a week.

Bullfight Spectacle

Witnessing a feisty bullfight is a quintessential Spanish experience. Granada's Plaza de Toros (Avenida Doctor Díez 25) is crowded with locals, during the bullfighting season which runs from May to June. For the Spaniards, this centuries-old tradition is a true display of the bull's bravery and fighting spirit. Catch the locals roar unanimously as the torero [bullfighter] washes his glory in the bull's blood.



Getting to Granada

Iberia and Lufthansa fly to Granada via Madrid and London. Fly from Madrid to Granada on Ryanair and Vueling at low prices, or catch the five-hour scenic bus ride on Alsa (www.alsa.es). There are overnight sleeper-trains on the RENFE that connects Granada to Barcelona (www.renfe.es). If you're planning to visit the vibrant beach city of Málaga, there are several buses that depart daily.

Granada's Federico García Lorca Airport is just 12km from the city centre. Catch the airport bus that stops in several parts of the city centre, and costs EUR3.

Beyond the city

Explore the vast cradling mountain range of Sierra Nevada

Las Alpujarras, the valleys on the southern face of the Sierra Nevada, stretch across a unique and remote mountainous area sprinkled with old-world charm. With its twisting terraces and country houses, the Alpujarras is an idyllic escape, just one hour from the city. To get a taste of local fare, dip into the Plato Alpujarrés, an assortment of cured meat – chorizo/sausage, morcilla (congealed pig's blood) and *patatas a lo pobre* (stir-fried potatoes).

In winter, Spaniards from all over the country flock to the **ski station of Sierra Nevada** for some fun in the snow. With perfect weather conditions for winter sports, expect to wrestle through the crowd during the ski season of December to April. By bus, it is just 45 minutes from the city centre.