

# Sketches of Southern Spain

Ancient villages and incredible tapas have always been staples of an Andalusia trip; add the region's newly dynamic cities into the mix, and you have the recipe for a perfect tour. **BY ALEXANDRA MARSHALL**

**FOR THE RECORD**, I love my in-laws dearly. But last summer, when my partner was unexpectedly called away to work during our visit to his parents' vacation home on the Spanish coast near Málaga, I got the urge to wander. All around me lay Andalusia, an evocative region I had barely dipped into—despite a college-age obsession with its famous native son, the poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca. Not long ago a friend from London had opened a B&B in

Archidona, a village an hour's drive north of my in-laws, and had been raving about the revival of Málaga, just a 45-minute drive to the south. I'd always wanted to see Andalusia's whitewashed hill towns, said to feel frozen in time. So I decided on an escape: I'd start in Málaga, pop over to Ronda, the White Town You Must See, head northwest to Seville, and then check out my friend's B&B in Archidona, with as many aimless detours as I could fit in along the way. →

Whitewashed buildings cling to the hillsides in Ronda, an ancient city in southern Spain's Málaga province.

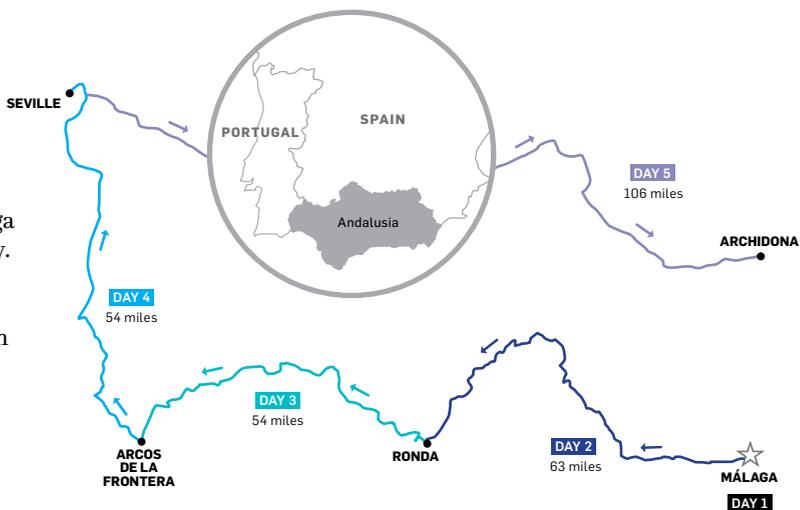
JESSICA SAMPLE

**DAY 1** MÁLAGA

I picked up a tin-can rental car at Málaga airport—and realized my mistake immediately. It became a millstone in the city’s almost entirely pedestrian historic center, made up of beautifully restored Baroque and Art Deco town houses. After stashing the car in a parking lot, I promptly forgot where it was, which meant later having to wind my way through marble-paved streets off the stately Marqués de Lario thoroughfare trying to find it. This took me past Casa Mira, a confectioner founded in 1890, where I ate a dense *turrón*, or nougat, ice cream that still haunts my dreams.

I loved Málaga’s impossibly grand Renaissance cathedral and the new port district with its flashy contemporary architecture—like the sleek Palmeral de las Sorpresas, a covered promenade that snakes along the broad shoreline like the skeleton of an eel. At the tail end (or maybe it’s the head?) sits Daniel Buren’s airy, upbeat El Cubo, a boxy, happy pavilion of colored glass. It’s the aboveground portion of the Centre Pompidou Málaga, the first offshoot outside France of Paris’s iconic modern-art museum. Not bad for a town that was, until recently, in a state of dereliction and disrepair.

At the other end of the eel is a neighborhood of Art Deco apartment buildings and 1960s towers that local urban revivalists have named Soho, unconcerned by the obvious comparisons to London or New York City. Once a warren of sex shops, it’s now home to health-food stores, cafés, and a booming street-art program known as MAUS (Málaga Arte Urbano Soho) with major pieces by Shepard Fairey, Belgium’s ROA, and →



**ANDALUSIA ROAD-TRIP CHEAT SHEET**

**GETTING THERE**

Fly or take the train to Málaga from Madrid or Barcelona and rent a car.

**DAY 1: ARRIVAL IN MÁLAGA**

Stay at the imposing **Gran Hotel Miramar** (*granhotel miramarmalaga.com*; doubles from \$334). Visit the **Centre Pompidou Málaga**, a pop-up by the Paris Pompidou set to remain open through 2025 (*pompidou-malaga.eu*). Stop for a *turrón* ice cream at historic confectionery **Casa Mira** (5 Marqués de Lario; 34-952-22-30-69). Try an Andalusian cooking class at **Laboratorio de Sabores** (*laboratoriode sabores.com*) before feasting on the modern Spanish tasting menu at **Sollo Restaurant** (*sollo.es*; tasting menu \$95).

**DAY 2: MÁLAGA → RONDA**

Recharge after the drive with wine and tapas at Ronda’s **Tragatá** (*tragata.com*). Spend the night at the delightful **Hotel la Fuente de la Higuera** (*hotella fuente.com*; doubles from \$219), hidden in the hills just outside town.

**DAY 3: RONDA → ARCOS DE LA FRONTERA**

Don’t miss Arcos’s **Iglesia de San Pedro** (4 Calle San Pedro), a hilltop church with a spectacular gold altar. Stay at **La Casa Grande** (*lacasa grande.net*; doubles from \$103), a 1729 manor house that’s now a boutique hotel.

**DAY 4: ARCOS DE LA FRONTERA → SEVILLE**

Get to Seville by lunchtime to explore the **Mercado Lonja del Barranco**

(*mercadolonjadel barranco.com*), a food hall in a former fish market. Aim to spend a whole afternoon at the **Real Alcazar** (*alcazarsevilla.org*), the palace of the city’s Muslim kings. Take refuge from the city heat by staying at **Hacienda de San Rafael** (*haciendade sanrafael.com*; doubles from \$344), on an olive estate 45 minutes outside town.

**DAY 5: SEVILLE → ARCHIDONA**

Have lunch at Archidona’s **Bar Central** (49 Calle Nueva) before checking in to **Almohalla 51** (*almohalla51.com*; doubles from \$125), a stylish B&B run by London transplants. The superior small plates at **Arte de Tapas** (*artedecocina.com*) make it perfect for dinner.



From left: El Cubo, a pavilion marking the entrance to the new Centre Pompidou Málaga; roasted tilapia with cream of smoked chard at Sollo Restaurant, outside Málaga.

Cape Town artist Faith47. “When they cleaned up the center of the city in 2016, Soho was the part left over,” said Amparo López, whose nearby cooking workshop, Laboratorio de Sabores, promotes Andalusian food. “In the five years we’ve been here, it’s gotten so much nicer,” she added. She said the region’s tourists are only now getting a real sense of its cuisine—beyond tapas, which some say originated here and are now as important to Spanish culture as flamenco (also Andalusian) and bullfighting (ditto).

The much-talked-about fine-dining restaurant Sollo, a short drive along the coast to the west, was a good place to dig deeper into Andalusian food’s modern-day iteration. But first I had to find it. (Pro tip: given the profound unreliability of GPS in Spain, always have a highway map on hand.) After my five panicked phone calls from somewhere in the hills around Fuengirola, chef Diego Gallegos met me at the entrance of the Doubletree Inn, which (somewhat incongruously) houses the restaurant, to escort me back to his tiny, Scandinavian-inspired space. As is only right when dining this close to the ocean, fish featured prominently on his tasting menu, from sea trout with garlic greens and parsnip purée to a macaron of Andalusian sturgeon *sobrassada* and black pudding. Bite after elaborately plated bite came accompanied by powerful local wines, which I sipped as crickets sang from the mountainside. Gallegos, who is Brazilian and apprenticed with star São Paulo chef Alex Atala, settled in Andalusia after falling in love with a local. “The people here are friendlier and calmer, not in so much of a hurry,” he said.

**DAY 2** RONDA

It was a good thing I wasn’t in a hurry, either. The friendly German-Dutch couple that owns Hotel la Fuente de la Higuera, a romantic rural B&B just outside Ronda, did their best to guide me by phone through the pouring rain to their renovated manor house, but the drive took far longer than I’d bargained for. When I finally arrived, I didn’t want to leave my suite, with its fireplace, antiques, and view of the hills, but Ronda is so spectacular, everyone had told me.

Perched on a dizzying gorge that cleaves the medieval old town from its 18th- and 19th-century outskirts, Ronda is indeed spectacular, with its bright, whitewashed town houses trimmed in mustardy ocher or blood red. Hoping to escape my fellow travelers, who snaked through every tiny byway like ants, I wandered into Santa María la Mayor, a church built on Moorish foundations after the 15th-



The Plaza de la Constitución, one of the highlights of Málaga’s Old Town.

century Reconquista. I had unwittingly arrived right at the point in a Catholic service when members of the congregation are called to embrace their neighbors, and was greeted like a fellow pilgrim.

I didn’t care that Tragatá, a shoebox-size tapas bar, was on the busiest street in town. The original outpost of what’s become a chain across Spain, Tragatá, much like Ronda, is far from an insider secret. But, also like Ronda, it is worth it—even for the crowd-averse. There were big local reds paired with delicately smoked sardines on tomato bread and a superb dish of stewed pork cheeks. I was just glad I came before the lunch rush, which in Spain starts well after 2 p.m.

**DAY 3** ARCOS DE LA FRONTERA

As I drove downhill through shady pine forests, more white towns appeared, like spills of Liquid Paper atop the brown hillsides, with dashing names like Zahara de la Sierra, Grazalema, and Arcos de la Frontera. I detoured to the lattermost after a steep climb up narrow roads. At the town’s fortresslike 16th-century church, San Pedro, in the tiny medieval center, a wedding was just finishing up. Rose petals fluttered over the esplanade as little girls in spit curls and organza ran by. I drank a beer at a small café beside the church while the owner →



From top: Seville's Real Alcazar is one of the world's finest examples of Moorish design; terra-cotta tiles and whitewashed walls provide respite from the heat at Almohalla 51 guesthouse, in Archidona.

of a neighboring hole-in-the-wall sang a serenade to two old ladies—the idyll disturbed only by the bridal party whipping down the narrow street in a shiny cobalt Mercedes. Arcos de la Frontera might be unassuming compared with the grandeur of Ronda, but its tranquility was a tonic. Unencumbered by expectations, I spent some of the loveliest hours of my trip there.

DAY 4

## SEVILLE

The scenery flattened out on the way to Seville, turning monotonous and brown. Upon entering the city, I realized the drive had been a useful palate cleanser. Seville's contentious history is written in Technicolor across its proud Baroque palaces, Gothic cathedrals, Moorish masterpieces, and jungly parks. It's a place that goes all the way with its aesthetic ambition and always has, from the lattice stonework of the 13th-century Real Alcazar to Jürgen Mayer's *Metropol Parasol* art installation: six massive mushrooms made from grids of pale wood that seem to float above Plaza de la Encarnación. Everyone seemed to be talking about the Mercado Lonja del Barranco, a food market in a newly restored iron-and-glass building designed by Gustave Eiffel on the Guadalquivir River. The crowd—mostly locals—grazed on samplers of paella, cheese plates from the Madrid-based Poncelet Cheese Tavern, and an array of *salmorejos*, or bread-thickened tomato soups.

I had planned on booking into the lovely Corral del Rey hotel, which is smack in the middle of the crowded historic center. But after all the stimulation of a day in the city, I decided, instead, to hole up at its sister property, Hacienda de San Rafael, halfway between Arcos de la Frontera and Seville. Its pool area, bright with bougainvillea, made the perfect antidote to the heat and the crowds of Seville.

DAY 5

## ARCHIDONA

My friendship with David Matthews was forged in the hellfire of London magazine publishing, and when he chucked it in to open a B&B, I cheered for him. He and his husband, Myles Gregson, built Almohalla 51 out of two adjoining town houses in Archidona, a village that sits at the foot of the Sierra de Gracia mountains. The sun was beating down when I arrived, so the big brass bed in my whitewashed room, which had a ceiling lined with exposed beams, was welcome. “Nothing much happens around here,” Matthews said with a laugh, though guests can, in fact, visit the prehistoric rock formations of El Torcal and the beautiful Baroque city of Antequera, both just around the corner.

I popped into the latter, thinking I'd make an afternoon of it. But after a stop at Arte de Tapas, an excellent contemporary luncheonette, the idleness of Andalusia took over. I skipped the sights and drove back to Archidona's Bar Central, where I passed a couple of hours people-watching under rows of dangling hams. A man carrying a bag of foam pool noodles walked in to say hello to some friends. He took one and bopped everyone at the table over the head, his laughter bellowing out. I was a little disappointed he didn't get around to me. ✕

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