

Andalusia Historical Outline

Al-Andalus

It seems Western Europe does not know about its Islamic past. Seven centuries of Muslim presence in Spain (711 – 1492) have left their mark on Andalusia or Al-Andalus, as it was then called. Ordinary life prospered as Arab, Visigoth, Castilian, and Berber worked together to forge the brilliant civilization that helped lead Europe out of the Dark Ages.

"For nearly eight centuries, under the Mohamedan rule, Spain set all Europe a shining example of a civilized and enlightened state. Art, literature and science prospered as they then prospered nowhere else in Europe. Mathematics, astronomy, botany, history, philosophy and jurisprudence were to be mastered in Spain, and Spain alone. Whatever makes a kingdom great and prosperous, whatever tends to refinement and civilization, was found in Muslim Spain..." (Stanley Lane-Poole)

Granada

Of all the great and splendid cities like Cordoba (Qurtuba), Sevilla (Ishbiliyya), Valencia (Balansiyyah), Cadiz (Qadis) - Granada (Garnatah) has a distinct and different atmosphere. Here the peaceful gardens of the "Palacio de Generalife" (the architects garden), the red rocks and the glamorous buildings of the Alhambra, the small corners and streets of the labyrinth like Albaicin (former Muslim district of Granada) are somehow communicating with you it's past and telling you stories about a city that was unmatched by its beauty: "The City of Granada finds her equal not in Cairo, nor Damascus, nor Iraq. She is the Bride Unveiled while the others are just the dowry" (unknown author).

There are many sites to visit in Granada but the Alhambra (meaning the "Red Fort" or "Red Palace") is clearly the standout attraction. I doubt any words that raise the claim to describe something so beautiful like the Alhambra. Indeed no word has the capacity to make justice to its beauty. It is not the gold and the pomp that characterizes the Alhambra, it is the centuries long traditional Islamic craft work; with its fascinating architecture, the carved walls and wood, the calligraphy and geometrical patterns. One cannot get enough of the Alhambra, but after a while one is awestruck by the beauty, unable to see the details anymore, one swings enchanted through the chambers and gardens. A glimpse of paradise we might call this place: "Small streams carry the water to numerous fountains and ponds, water even rushing over a stone stairway. One observes and hears splashing and gushing water, with displays of colour under the conifers roses, lilies, jasmine, etc. Aside from the luxury of the Palace itself, there are the courtyards shaded by a variety of trees and cooled by fountains and underground water channels, and walls decorated by patterned tiles. All through one feels the presence of God Almighty, for there are Quranic verses inscribed on the walls, the most prominent and ubiquitous being: "Wa la ghalib illa Allah" (There is no conqueror but Allah)." (S.M Ghazanfar).

The splendors of the Alhambra and its gardens have inspired many musicians, artists, and authors. Among them was renowned author, Washington Irving, who took up residence in the Alhambra and wrote "Tales of the Alhambra". The graphic artist M.C. Escher's interest began when in 1936 he visited the Alhambra and was fascinated with its tile patterns, and spent days sketching them. The inspiration here lay the foundation for his work - for which he is most famous for. He based his work on these intricate Arabic designs, and

repetitive floral and mathematical patterns. Moorish arts influenced Spain's architecture even after the rule of Muslims. Many cities which came under Christian rule brought Muslim artists, called "Mudejar" to build representative buildings. The Alcazar of Seville (the king's palace) for example was built in the Mudejar-style and can be seen today. Also in the so called new world one can observe a mix of Mudejar and Spanish-gothic influences.

End of Al-Andalus

"Spain and the West stand forever in their debt. The Muslims were instrumental in making Spain a 'Paradise on Earth', and issuing forth the Renaissance. I've observed that professors of philosophy, theology and history will agree with you concerning the greatness of Muslim Spain, yet they only speak of it once you've initiated the conversation! Muslim Spain is hardly spoken of, while the works of Muslims in Al-Andalus until this day remain unknown and underappreciated. The intellectual community which the northern scholars found in Spain was so far superior to what they had at home that it left a lasting jealousy of Arab culture, which was to color Western opinions for centuries." (Burke, James. Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1985.)

The marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella sealed the fate of the faltering Granada sultans. Catholic Spain, finally united, continued to force the Muslims toward the sea, town by town. Cordoba was taken by Castile in 1236, and Seville in 1248. Only Granada remained as the last Muslim stronghold until in 1492, with the fall of the last Nasrid ruler in Granada, Muhammad XII, known as Abu Abdullah called "Boabdil", Spain was finally taken by the Christian troops under Ferdinand and Isabella and the so called "Reconquista" of Spain was finished. According to a legend Boabdil stopped to look back and shed a tear over his lost kingdom which is known as Suspiro del Moro (the Sigh of the Moor). His domineering mother Aisha, allegedly berated him: "Fitting you cry like a woman over what you could not defend like a man."

Isabella, in her fierce quest to eradicate Islam from Spain, issued forth decrees of mass conversions in her 'Holy War' against the Muslims. Muslim prayers were forbidden and mosques in their original splendor were destroyed and converted into churches. Muslims were forcefully converted to Christianity, who were usually insincere Christians fearing for their lives, but remained Muslim by heart. These were called "Moriscos" and they survived a century more, at the Alpujarras's rocky folds, raided in the lowlands and rebelled against the Christian injustices.

Until the inquisition, Muslims were free to practice their religion openly. However, during the inquisition led by Isabella, the rights of Muslims and Jews were taken away. The final expulsion occurred in early 17th century when all the remaining 'Moriscos,' those who were forcibly baptized, were forced from Spain in 1605. An estimated 3 million were expelled, along with all of Spain's skilled workers and masterminds. The inquisition was finally completed, and naturally, Spain fell into depression and was reduced to nothingness. Undoubtedly, Spain soon found herself victim to her own cruelty...

"The land deprived of skillful irrigation of the Moors grew impoverished and neglected, the richest and most fertile valleys languished and were deserted, and most of the populous cities which had filled every district in Andalusia, fell into ruinous decay; and beggars, friars, and bandits took the place of scholars, merchants and knights. So low fell Spain when she had driven away the Moors. Such is the melancholy contrast offered by her history." (Lane-Poole, Stanley. The Moors in Spain Beirut: Khayats, 1967).

"With Granada fell all Spain's greatness. For a brief while, indeed, the reflection of the Moorish splendour cast a borrowed light upon the history of the land which it had once warmed with its sunny radiance. The

great epoch of Isabella, Charles V and Philip II, of Columbus, Cortes and Pizarro, shed a last halo about the dying monuments of a mighty state. When followed the abomination of dissolution, the rule of inquisition and the blackness of darkness in which Spain has been plunged ever since. "In the land where science was once supreme, the Spanish doctors became noted for nothing but their ignorance and incapacity. The arts of Toledo and Almeria faded into insignificance. (Stanley Lane-Poole).

Even though the cruel persecutions and the brutal expulsion Muslims in Andalusia experienced, the Quran however reminds the believers of the transience of this world and the justice of Allah:

"...I will forgive all the shortcomings and remove the evil deeds of those who were expelled from their homes or were persecuted for my sake and who fought for my cause and were slain. I shall admit them into Gardens underneath which rivers flow. This is their reward from Allah, and with Allah alone is the richest reward!" (Al-Qur'an, 3:195)

Conclusion

Andalusia was a hotspot of different religions, cultures and lifestyles where Christians, Muslims and Jews lived together in unity and interaction that seeks its equal, even today.

Andalusia shows Islam's manifold contributions and their impact in the making of the West. For a Muslim visiting Andalusia there will be on the one side sorrow over this vanished past but on the other side also a sort of a therapy for the soul, a spiritual medicine where one finds hope for a brighter Islamic future.

I want to end this little historical overview by citing Philip II (1527-1598) the King of Spain and Portugal (during his reign, Spain reached the height of its influence and power) with these reminding and admonishing words:

"The Arabs suddenly appeared in Spain like a star which crosses through the air with its light, spreads its flames on the Horizon and then vanishes rapidly into naught. They appeared in Spain to fill her suddenly with their activity and the fruit of their genius, and endowed her with a glorious glamour which enveloped her from the Pyrenees to Gibraltar and from the oceans to the Barcelona. But a burning love for liberty and independence, a fickle character disposed to frivolity and merriness, neglect of old virtues, an unfortunate disposition of revolution, provoked always by an inflamed imagination, violent passions and ambitions, a spirit to dominate, and other factors of decay, worked in the course of time, to demolish this grand edifice raised by men like Tariq, 'Abdul Rahman al-Nasir, Muhammad ibn al-Ahmer, and led the Arabs to internal dissention, which sapped their power and pushed them to the abyss of naught."

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Links

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About Traveling in Islam:

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